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“Promoting **justice** and **self-determination** through the **peaceful resolution** of **disputes** for individuals, families and businesses.”

## Staff

**Executive Director:** Jon Wilmot

**Case Managers:** Alan Ryder, Kim Vetter, Shandra Steininger

**Parent Educators:** Zena Patillo, Zayda Rodriguez

**Executive Assistant:** Cara Fedewa

**Accounting Assistant:** Derek Decker



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## The Concept of Restorative Justice

I started exploring ideas of restorative justice back in 1992. In fact, this is what got me involved in mediation, and led to my position as Executive Director of the Dispute Resolution Center. I would like to share this concept with you. It is a powerful framework for approaching justice in our society.

For starters, let's think about the concept of "justice." In ancient times, there were no courts or attorneys. When a member of the tribe or village harmed another member, the community sought to restore the victim and hold the offender accountable. It was not until the Middle Ages that the concept of crime "against the king" started to take shape, leading to our modern-day system of laws, state prosecution, and criminal justice system.

Regrettably, as the system changed, the victim became a bystander. In most cases of crime today, the victim and the community are excluded from the process of justice. Justice is administered only by the prosecutors and courts. The offender receives punishment, but the victim is only a witness for the prosecution.

Restorative justice offers a different lens through which to view victim and offender relationships. According to Howard Zehr, a leading restorative justice advocate and author, "restorative justice is a process to involve to the extent possible

those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations, in order to heal and put things as right as possible."

In a restorative justice framework, an offender must actively work to repair the harm they've caused, rather than passively receive their punishment. The truth of the matter is that incarceration is overused in cases of nonviolent crime. "Do the crime, do the time" does not restore anyone impacted by the crime.

Though community safety requires incarceration at times, there are many ways to hold offenders accountable that are more cost-effective and better at reducing recidivism. There is also much more we can be doing to restore and empower victims of crime. Victims need information about what happened and they want to tell their story.

How does this all fit in with the Dispute Resolution Center? Mediation is one tool that can be used to hold offenders accountable and to help victims heal. Different in many ways from other forms of mediation, victim-offender dialogue is about providing opportunities for listening, healing, and restoration. There are many other tools in the restorative justice toolbox as well, all of which can have a place in our community and in the justice system.

Community mediation seeks to transform conflict into peace. Restorative justice is a great way to accomplish that.

Check out our **new website:**  
[www.drcwm.org](http://www.drcwm.org)



## Thanks Pam!

When a young paralegal student named Pam Oldham saw a commercial for the Dispute Resolution Center of West Michigan in 1988, she thought that the Center might provide her with a place she could roll up her sleeves and actually do real work. Little did she know that it was to become her professional home for the next twenty years!

"I've worked with more than 100 volunteer mediators in my career at the DRC," says Oldham. "The volunteers are the heart of this organization. We couldn't do what we do with the loyal team of volunteer mediators who stay with us year after year."

Pam worked at the DRC so long, she was like a forecaster for caseload. "When college let out in the spring, we had a raft of tenant/landlord cases," she recalls, laughing. "In the summer we would see more parent/child issues. In the fall we would get cases about leaf burning and yard raking. Human emotions follow the seasons, just like the weather."

As a mediator as well as the mediator coordinator, Pam saw all sides of human disagreements. "People lose trust when they get involved in a dispute," she says. "Mediation is a place where they can talk to each other, regain trust, and reach agreement."

Pam left the Dispute Resolution Center in mid-2008 to move to Texas with her family. On behalf of all the volunteers, clients, staff and board members, we thank her for twenty years of loyal service!



## Fix It Fast

Business relationships are prone to disputes, just like personal relationships. We recently had a call from the customer of a propane company. This customer was going through financial difficulties, including home foreclosure, and had not paid for his most recent propane delivery.

The president of the propane company intended to take the matter to court; however the customer had disappeared. This left the propane company with no recourse to obtain payment. However, the customer eventually resurfaced and contacted the Dispute Resolution Center to see if the matter could be worked out.

The mediation was actually carried out over the phone. The customer's first proposed settlement structure did not work for the propane supplier; he counter-offered and that offer was accepted. The customer honored the terms of the agreement, and the debt was paid in full, on schedule.

"I love mediation," says the propane company president. "The last thing I want to do is go to court. It's a waste of time. I have used mediation several times, and it has always proven successful."

## 2008 Service Statistics

Total Cases Opened -- 499

### Participant Evaluations

Satisfied with Mediator  
Agree ----- 97%  
Disagree----- 3%

Outcome Was Satisfactory  
Agree ----- 90%  
Disagree----- 10%

Would Recommend Mediation  
Agree ----- 98%  
Disagree----- 2%

Would Use Mediation Again  
Agree ----- 95%  
Disagree----- 5%

**“Mediation kept  
peace between  
us.”**



## Chat With the Board:

Hon. William G. Kelly

We all know that using the right tool makes any job easier. This is especially true in the courtroom, where different cases require different tools. Mediation is one of the tools that I find works very well, especially in small claims court.

The 62B Kentwood District Court has been running a mediation pilot program for many years now. For one or two days every month, we have mediators "on call" for the day. I review each case to see if mediation might be a good fit. If so, I present the option of immediate mediation, right then and there, with a trained mediator. If the parties cannot agree, they can come back into the courtroom that same day and I will hear the case.

This approach works for many reasons. First, it allows the involved parties to reach resolution without having to take another day off from work to go mediate. Secondly, they know that they will reach resolution—either in mediation or through my ruling. And lastly, it gives participants a choice about how they resolve their disagreement.

This is especially important in cases which involve ongoing relationships between the parties. Mediation helps them preserve the relationship by talking and working things out themselves.

When we started the pilot, I did not know how well mediation would work. I have been pleasantly surprised at its success. Most of the people who choose the immediate mediation option are able to resolve the issue on their own. Very few of them show back up in the courtroom.

If Governor Granholm signs the bill increasing small claims from \$3,000 to \$5,000, I see this leading to many more filings, and hopefully the chance to implement mediation for equitable, faster solutions to more disputes.



**“Mediation  
helped us come  
to an agreement  
that we weren't  
able to come to  
on our own.”**

## 2008 In Review

For us, 2008 was a year of variety. Our center mediates a broader array of disputes than any other center in Michigan. This speaks to the abilities of our mediators, and the variety of outreach activities in which we have been engaged.

A few interesting facts about cases in 2008 come from our consumer survey. The Dispute Resolution Center asks each party involved in mediation to complete a short survey. This allows us to keep tabs on the quality of our services, and make sure that we are meeting the needs of the people who come to us for help.

As we look at the results from 2008, several things stand out. First of all, we noticed that a very high percentage of people were satisfied, both with the job of the mediator (97%) and with the outcome of the mediation (90%). It is highly unlikely that a court proceeding would get those types of positive ratings!

Secondly, we noticed the impact of mediation on people's lives. Eighty-five percent of respondents agreed or somewhat agreed that they had improved at least one conflict resolution skill through mediation. For us, this means we are teaching people things that they will be able to use in future disputes, perhaps allowing them to resolve issues on their own.

We also found that 38% of our respondents said their relationship with the other person had improved as a result of mediation. This might mean that communication got better, or that the people experienced emotional healing, or that they simply understood each other better after having talked. We are very excited about this statistic, because our goal is to preserve relationships and reduce adversarial proceedings.

We continue to seek ways in which mediation can be used more often, and/or as an alternative to the win-lose environment of a court proceeding. We served 109 clients with court-ordered mediation services, and we hope that our continued close relationship with the various court systems will help bring more people to the table to talk.

**“Thank you! It's a  
wonderful feeling to  
have the weight off  
our shoulders with  
a solution to this  
problem.”**

We also plan to continue outreach activities to the community, to businesses, and to families. There are very few disputes that cannot be mediated to a successful conclusion, while preserving relationships and building for the future. We hope to be wildly busy in 2009!