

# Update

December 2009/January 2010

## Serving the Multi-Cultural Community

By Andrew Kidde

Bellevue Neighborhood Mediation Program has begun a concerted outreach to Bellevue's diverse communities. This effort has many facets: translating materials into key languages, recruiting volunteers from diverse backgrounds, giving presentations to organizations with immigrant populations, and identifying volunteers as "cultural ambassadors." It's an exciting and energizing project ... all the same, it's a good time to do some soul searching and ask ourselves: what is our own culture; how does it drive our practice; and how well does our practice serve the diverse communities of Bellevue?

Community mediation in the US has been primarily developed by white, middle class, educated citizens, and while the movement has become increasingly diverse, our practice still reflects the culture of those who first developed it. We are individualists, prizing the self determination of our clients. We believe that people are created equal, and readily will mediate cases between teens and parents, young and old, wealthy and indigent. We believe that humans can control their fate, that those in conflict should think creatively and be open to new ideas. We laud cooperativeness and collaboration, and view competitive negotiation as an obstacle that must be managed. We believe that people say what they mean, and that we can elicit all the important content by asking the right questions. We take pride in our impartiality, assuming that clients will trust us if they see we are impartial.

I believe these basic cultural tendencies have a lot going for them, and further, I believe mediation is a wonderfully flexible dispute resolution method for mediating in many cultural settings and in cross cultural disputes in particular. At the same time, I know there is nothing universal about our culture, and we must have some humility as we encounter the variety of cultural beliefs in our community. Specifically we must appreciate that for many of our culturally diverse clients, our assumptions and practices may not be comfortable, or even helpful, in resolving disputes.

But, let's start with what works. Mediation is based on an individualist ethic – yet as Julia Gold has written, it also "accommodates collectivist values" more effectively than, for example, litigation. Community mediation has an "emphasis



on relational values" that serves as a balance to the spirit of individualism. In this way, it can be a very appropriate dispute resolution forum for disputes between members of a collectivist culture, such as Mexican-American, and members of an individualist culture, such as Anglo-American.

Our mediation culture is also based on the belief that people come to mediation ready to say what they mean in explicit and direct language. In the language of culture theorists, we are "low context" communicators. "High context" communicators, on the other hand, do not verbalize all, or even most, of what they are trying to communicate – instead much of the message is conveyed indirectly by innuendo, symbols, or the setting of the communication.

The Chinese, for example, use high context communication, while Americans use low context. This difference between Chinese and Americans can easily lead to misunderstanding and conflict. Americans may become frustrated by their Asian counterparts' unwillingness to put their cards on the table, seeing this behavior as evasive or crafty. Chinese, on the other hand, may be offended by their American counterparts' bluntness and failure to note the importance of the relationship. Mediators using a high context communication style would probably not be effective -- the American would likely remain frustrated. On the other hand, community mediators with their low context communication style can be useful in this context as a kind of translator – helping the Chinese party to be more explicit, and encouraging the American to be less direct and aggressive.

The community mediation model clearly has some virtues for working on cross cultural mediation. However, our model can also be very challenging in some cultural contexts. For example, many cultures are hierarchical, having an expectation that power is distributed unequally across society. In the language of cultural theorists, these cultures have "high power distance." Other cultures are more egalitarian, stressing equality and opportunity for everyone. These cultures are described as having "low power distance." The culture of community mediation is generally of low power distance. In providing our parent-teen mediation service, we assume that teens and adults can negotiate as more or less equals. Yet for

families from traditional high power difference cultures, for example Mexico and China, the idea of parents negotiating with a teenager may threaten the natural order of things.

High power distance cultures with established mediation traditions, such as the Chinese, commonly expect that mediators should be senior, high status individuals who speak authoritatively on the substance of the dispute. As Honeyman, Goh, and Kelly note, "The educative role is an essential part of Chinese mediation, with the mediators assuming a social duty, instructing the disputants in morally righteous behavior." Our community mediation culture, on the other hand, with its expectation of low power distance, leads us to believe that anyone trained in the skills of mediation and experienced in using those skills can mediate, and further that this mediator should refrain from adopting any authoritative tone, except perhaps in process decisions.

Our emphasis on the neutrality of the mediator may also be alienating in some cultures. Honeyman, Goh, and Kelly, looking at mediations between Australian aboriginals and white Australians, state that the aboriginals "desire a mediator who is connected to their life experience -- even to the degree that a 'biased' mediator is seen as quite acceptable, at least as part of the team." This connection to the mediator is needed primarily to establish trust, but also importantly because a connected mediator is much more likely to understand the significance of cultural nuances and non-verbal communication. This preference also obtains in Japan, John Barkai has written, that for the Japanese, "the next best thing to having a mutual friend as a mediator is having a person who knows one of the parties well, even if they do not know the other person at all."

In our community mediations we ask disputants to "invent options for mutual gain" (in the classic words of Fischer and Ury) through creative integration of parties' interests. This request works well for individuals from cultures similar that of community mediation. We have "low uncertainty avoidance," that is we readily accept change, and we prize innovation. But this request could be quite unsettling for member of a culture with "high uncertainly avoidance," such as Greek or Japanese culture. For these individuals, established structure and rules should guide action, and uncertainty should be reduced when possible. Asking them to brainstorm new creative solutions could be awkward at best, and possibly quite threatening.

As we embark on this project of diversity outreach we need to acknowledge that our typical community mediation practice may not work well in some culture settings. While there is no easy answer -- there are clearly some things we need to do. First, in convening and conducting mediations we need to be aware of the culturally based expectations of our clients. In some cases, we can modify our practice to accommodate the needs of parties from diverse cultures. In other cases accommodation may not be possible, if doing so would require abandoning a key moral tenet. In any case, as we move forward with our outreach to Bellevue's diverse communities, we will do so with a commitment to learn as much as teach, and to be flexible in meeting the needs of our community when and how we can.

## **One Day Training: Cultural and Gender Issues in Negotiation and Mediation**

**How do culture and gender affect communication and negotiation? Nina Meierding, a national leader in the conflict resolution, will present practical solutions and techniques for professionals.**

Wed. Jan. 13th, from 9 am—5 pm  
At Bellevue City Hall in room 1E-108  
Cost: \$75 — Limited Spaces! (Scholarships are available.)  
To reserve your space contact Gwen Jones at 425-452-2897.

## **February Neighborhood In-Service Training: Everything You Wanted to Know About CC&Rs But Were Afraid to Ask**

with Terry Leahy  
Wed. Feb. 24th, from 6:30-8 PM in room 1E-112

**HAPPY NEW YEAR**

## **Recent Feedback from Mediation Clients:**

"Our situation is much better. We are using new techniques to resolve new problems."

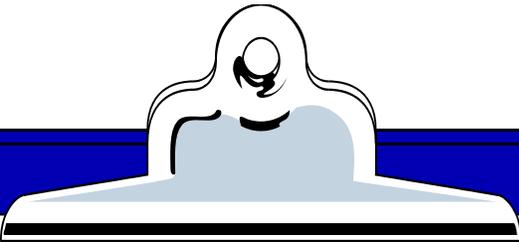
"It was an interesting process that helped me in finding closure. I felt heard."

"Things are much better. We got to know each other face to face. We talk more now and are working to resolve issues with communication skills learned in mediation. We would definitely use the Mediation Program again."

Barkai, John. *What's a Cross-Cultural Mediator to Do? A Low-Context Solution for a High-Context Problem*, Cardozo Journal of Conflict Resolution, Vol. 10, p. 43 (2008).

Gold, Julia Ann. *ADR Through a Cultural Lens How Cultural Values Shape Our Disputing Processes*, J. Disp. Resol. vol. 2, p. 289 (2005).

Honeyman, C, Goh BC & Kelly, L. *Skill is not enough: seeking connectedness and authority in mediation*, Negotiation Journal, vol. 20, no. 4, p. 489. (2004).



## Parent—Teen Update

By  
Cathy Goldman

Reflecting back on the 2009-2010 school year, I would say the Parent-Teen program is doing very well. We continue to get calls from families who want our service and we have scheduled many mediations since the school year began. We have also attended three Truancy Workshops for the Bellevue School District and they are going very well. Our teens are able to talk to the truant teens in a non-judging, caring way and these teens are opening up to them. It is a joy to watch the teens facilitate this process.



Our next gathering will occur on January 6<sup>th</sup> at 6 pm at Bellevue City Hall. We will start the evening with a fun "gift exchange." Wrap up a gift you can live without or purchase something for under \$10.00. The game is fun and it will be our opportunity to be festive for the New Year!

I wish you all a very happy holiday season! May the New Year bring you peace, fulfillment and fun!

## **BNMP Training Opportunities For Mediators and Conciliators**

### ***Parent-Teen In-Service Training:***

with Cathy Goldman

Wed. Jan. 6th, from 6-8 PM in room 1E-112

### ***One Day Training:***

#### **Cultural and Gender Issues in Negotiation and Mediation**

with Nina Meierding

Wed. Jan. 13th, from 9 AM - 5 PM

Room 1E-108 Cost: \$75

### ***Volunteer Recognition Party***

#### **(Note change of date)**

Tues. Feb. 2, 2010, Time TBD

Mercer Slough Environmental Education Center

### ***Neighborhood In-Service Training:***

#### **Everything You Wanted to Know About CC&Rs**

But Were Afraid to Ask, with Terry Leahy

Wed. Feb. 24th, from 6:30-8 PM in room 1E-112

### ***Training:***

#### **Basic Mediation Training Spring 2010**

Wed. *April 14* 5:00 pm — 9:00 pm

Fri. *April 16* 9:00 am — 5:00 pm

Sat. *April 17* 9:00 am — 5:00 pm

Wed. *April 21* 5:00 pm — 9:00 pm

Fri. *April 23* 9:00 am — 5:00 pm

Sat. *April 24* 9:00 am — 5:00 pm

Cost: \$250

## **VOLUNTEER NEWS**

### ***Welcome New Conciliators:***

Colleen James

Joseph Scovel

### **Program Staff:**

Program Co-Manager: Cheryl Cohen - 452-5222

Program Co-Manager: Andrew Kidde - 452-5288

Program Assistant: Gwen Jones - 452-2897

Parent-Teen Coordinator: Cathy Goldman - 452-4091

City of Bellevue website: <http://www.bellevuewa.gov>  
(Look for the Mediation Program under "Neighborhood Information")

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*Volunteer Profile:*

**Lynn Terpstra**



Lynn was born in Pittsburgh, PA, grew up in Phoenix and Los Angeles, studied English at UCLA, immigrated to Canada in 1972, married and raised two children and in 1986 moved to Bellevue where she found a job as Director of Marketing for Crossroads Bellevue. After 21 remarkable years working with Ron Sher at Crossroads and other Terranomics projects, Lynn left the company in 2007 and started Community Glue, a consulting business working with clients to create compelling spaces and cultivating a spirit of community through place making and creative social events.

Lynn currently serves on the Board of the Family Resource Center and is a past member of YES, Kirkland Performance Center and the Ethnic Heritage Council. She is a volunteer conciliator with the Mediation Program with a special interest in community outreach. Her interest in mediation is based on the idea that conflict is a powerful force for change and resolving conflicts is one of the cornerstones for 'Community Glue.' She reads too much, travels too little, is finally learning to cook and wants to learn how to swim laps for exercise. She is always thrilled to meet other fans of 'The Wire.'

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**BELLEVUE  
NEIGHBORHOOD MEDIATION PROGRAM**

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City of Bellevue Department of Planning and Community Development  
P.O. Box 90012 Bellevue, WA 98009-9012