

Mediating Community Partnerships: Spread the Word!

Nicole Jabson 22 April 2015

What once was a residential facility for troubled girls has now become a neighborhood justice center for every resident in greater Philadelphia. In 1982, Sr. Brigid Lawlor conducted a needs assessment of the 14th and 35th police districts in northwest Philadelphia to identify community concerns that fit with the Sisters of Good Shepherd's mission of reconciliation. Crime and violence had escalated in these neighborhoods, and Sr. Lawlor soon realized that unresolved disputes among the youth concerned community residents. Two years later, Sr. Lawlor and the Sisters of Good Shepherd founded the Good Shepherd Mediation Program (GSMP) to serve the needs of families and children in conflict.

Since its inception 30 years ago, GSMP has empowered residents from the Philadelphia community to creatively search for meaningful and lasting solutions to conflicts without resorting to crime or violence. GSMP has reached thousands of lives not only in Philadelphia but also in different parts of the world. It is important that Philadelphians recognize the work GSMP does on a daily basis and acknowledge the impact of its programs and

services on all individuals. GSMP continues to serve a range of Philadelphians at low to no cost for its programs and services, and it is open to any individual who needs its services. Ideally, anyone who has a vested interest in increasing their regional impact should model their work after GSMP's because of its high-impact social innovation framework. Although GSMP is in need of an increased audience, new donors and new volunteers, it does not fail to make waves in the Philadelphia community—waves that protect them, strengthen them and unify them.

Philadelphians should feel inclined to learn more about mediation, contribute as mediation sponsors and volunteer and support the mission of the Good Shepherd Mediation Program.

First, it is important to identify the purpose and understand the benefits of mediation. By definition, mediation is an informal and confidential way for people to resolve disputes with the help of a facilitator who is trained to help people work out their own solutions to their problems (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2014). Often, mediation is mistaken for arbitration, where a third party reviews evidence in a case and imposes a decision that is legally binding on both sides and enforceable in the courts (Alberta Arbitration and Mediation Society, 2013). According to Cheryl Cutrona, Esq., GSMP executive director, "A continuing challenge for [Good Shepherd] is to educate people on what mediation is and how it can benefit people more than

the traditional system" (personal communication, November 10, 2014). Mediation is a win-win proposition. There is a collaborative mutual gain, where the parties involved reach a consensus about the best decision for their situation at the present time. Cutrona notes: "Research shows that parties are more invested in honoring the agreement when both parties decide the outcome." Mediation works to benefit all parties involved and aims to create collaborative relationships between parties.

As aforementioned, mediation engages and empowers people to address conflict creatively, constructively and cooperatively. Moreover, Cutrona and the GSMP family continue to influence the community by fostering community-building values (e.g., cooperation, peace, respect and responsibility), creating amicable relationships and transforming lives. Yet there is not enough coverage around the purpose and benefits of mediation specifically by GSMP. To address this issue, GSMP is in the process of creating a mediation slogan, establishing a strong online presence and pitching mediation to the media via public service announcements as well as television and radio commercials.

Meanwhile, GSMP offers an array of programs and services, either free or on a low-cost sliding scale, such as community and family mediation, training and consulting. "Young people often grow up with the belief that conflict is a bad thing and that there can be no good outcomes"

(GSMP, 2014). GSMP provides a Juvenile Offender Division Program, where youth offenders take a one-day intensive workshop to learn how to manage their anger, take responsibility for their actions and see conflict as a positive opportunity to grow and change. In addition, GSMP offers pre-hearing conferences in the dependency unit of Philadelphia's family court, in which all of the parties involved are given the opportunity to gather, discuss and resolve a range of issues prior to court hearing. Other programs include Victim Offender Conferencing (VOC), in which youth offenders participate actively in the process of making amends to their victims, and Elder Dispute Resolution Services (ELDRS). In addition, GSMP coordinates multicultural workshops for distinct ethnic and religious groups.

GSMP's reputation for its programs and services has grown over the span of 30 years. In 1992, GSMP launched the first AIDS Mediation Project in the United States, in which HIV-positive persons were able to resolve their disputes through mediation. GSMP also created the Peace Theater in 1994, where AmeriCorps Vista volunteers helped GSMP host summer workshops for students to learn more about mediation and conflict resolution. In the two years that followed the Peace Theater, GSMP initiated its Community Peace and Safety Network, in which it collaborated with Tricia S. Jones and Temple University. GSMP traveled to four communities in Johannesburg, South Africa, and developed mediation workshops for

students and community members. GSMP also provided conflict coaching trainings in Guam and in Jerusalem, Beer Sheva and Rehovot, Israel. Notably, GSMP's programs have tackled various issues and have served a vast number of social groups.

GSMP understands the need for mediation services and partners with several foundations and public entities to fund 75 percent of its programs and services at little or no cost to the community. Cutrona and the GSMP family continue to introduce innovative mediation, peacemaking and social justice programs to the community in collaboration with the courts, universities and government agencies. Essentially, GSMP is working tirelessly to build peace, enable justice and restore relationships within families and communities.

For many years, AmeriCorps Vista provided GSMP with additional manpower to help the neighborhood justice center launch its programs, but also to build awareness around mediation throughout the city of Philadelphia. Beginning 1986, AmeriCorps VISTA left significant and valuable imprints on GSMP, and has contributed to its success in many ways.

Current GSMP vice president Elisa Weaver Hines remembers her first encounter with an AmeriCorps Vista volunteer: "Good Shepherd started its mediation program in 1984. By 1986, I was a junior at ML King High School, and AmeriCorps VISTA members were working in four

Philadelphia public schools, training students in mediation. ML King was one of the four schools where the AmeriCorps VISTA members were working. Members would train students in mediation one day a week during the lunch hour" (personal communication, November 15, 2014). One of those volunteers included her good friend, former AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer DeVonne Coleman White. White received mediation training from GSMP and worked directly with youth. Hines remained a volunteer all throughout high school and college, and she mentioned working with AmeriCorps VISTA members on different projects, such as: community peacemaking networking events, community-based networking events, fundraising events and the Peace Theater summer program (she and AmeriCorps Vista volunteers took the lead in staffing the program).

Hines believes that AmeriCorps Vista volunteers excelled in engaging the community and building the capacity of GSMP. "The Good Shepherd Neighborhood House Mediation Program had a staff that was small back then, but they had their hands and feet on the ground to get the message of mediation out to the community." AmeriCorps Vista volunteers engaged students and community members and embodied what they were taught on a daily basis. Hines continued, "VISTAs did not make a lot of money, but they valued the work that they did, which gave me a different way of thinking about professionalism. Specifically, if you are going to teach mediation, live it and

do it. The volunteers inspired me to do the same."

Like Hines, former AmeriCorps Vista volunteer Joshua Hill, Esq. shared a similar life-changing experience from the partnership between AmeriCorps Vista and GSMP.

"AmeriCorps VISTA is an opportunity for people to give back to their community via community service—it is a give and take with the community...I assisted the full-time mediator and helped facilitate pre-hearing conferences, and [at GSMP], I was able to grasp family law and criminal law. I received exposure to law and courts, where I would not have been able to get at law school" (personal communication, November 14, 2014).

Notably, Cutrona highlights her view of success for GSMP: "I feel it is a success for Good Shepherd to survive in this economic climate with other mediation centers going out of business around me, but I live for the small successes: each time a conflict resolves or a training participant or former intern comes back to tell me how what they learned about constructive conflict engagement changed their lives, to see former interns and employees working at really wonderful conflict resolution jobs as peacemakers."

For 30 years, Cutrona has witnessed the significant impact GSMP has on the residents in the Philadelphia community and beyond. Given GSMP's considerable social impact, its large impact needs to be reflected in a larger percentage of funding from its events and contributions.

Overall, an aspect that is little known to the community is that GSMP invites the community to partner with the organization by supporting its mission. GSMP needs to generate more support and draw more attention to the value of mediation through various outlets. Even though GSMP has had the opportunity to mediate in Guam, Israel, Singapore and South Africa, the Philadelphia area should help GSMP open more neighborhood justice centers throughout Pennsylvania. Since GSMP is Philadelphia's only community mediation center, it sets the precedents and paves the way for future mediation centers. GSMP has earned its golden star over the last few decades, and it would be rewarding for the Neighborhood Justice Center to engage more diverse communities in mediation. More importantly, it is indisputable that greater Philadelphia should mediate its partnership with GSMP. For the invaluable work that GSMP does for the community, the community itself should help GSMP spread the word about mediation and support its mission by giving and volunteering. It is a win-win proposition for GSMP and Philadelphia.

References

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