

MIDWEEK
Inside Feature

Handling conflict resolution in Hawai'i and beyond, The Mediation Center of the Pacific has been helping communities achieve harmony for the past four decades.

PACIFIC PEACEMAKERS

By
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From divorce cases to conflicts in the workplace, communities across the islands are plagued daily by civil disputes — and for the last 40 years, The Mediation Center of the Pacific has helped Hawai'i cope.

The organization got started back in 1979, when courts throughout the U.S. were overburdened by civil dispute cases. A task force formed by the American Bar Association created Neighborhood Justice Centers, places where community members could come together and resolve their issues quickly and inexpensively. Following this trend, Honolulu set up its own Makiki Neighborhood Justice Center, making it one of the first in the country.

Though the center began as a small operation in a wooden shanty at the Makiki Pumping Station, handling about 60 domestic cases in its initial year, it has since grown into a major nonprofit organization dedicated to providing mediation services and training across the Pacific. To reflect this, the center was renamed The Me-

diation Center of the Pacific in 1999, and now handles over 600 domestic disputes and serves more than 6,000 people annually.

"We've come a long way from the 20 people who got trained in the small shack in Makiki," notes Tracey Wiltgen, executive director of The Mediation Center of the Pacific. "The mission and the values are still the same. It's just that the breadth of the work we do has grown tremendously."

MCP helps community members by mediating conflict resolution for a wide variety of issues relating to work, family, civil rights and neighbors. The organization also offers a robust training program to help people learn how to become mediators. Over the years, the nonprofit has provided mediation training to the military (in Japan, Guam and South Korea), local school principals and members of Honolulu Police Department.

Wiltgen hopes to continue to expand MCP's mediation training to make conflict resolution more attainable to those who need it, as civil disputes can weigh more heavily on those involved than many would expect. An example she cites

is workplaces where employees are dissatisfied with their conditions. Such problems can spread to other employees, causing productivity to go down and costing the business money — not to mention potential lawsuits, employee resignation and consequences extending even beyond that.

"The cost of conflict is much bigger than just the conflict itself, and people don't recognize that," says Wiltgen. "It isn't just about helping people resolve their immediate conflicts, but it saves our state a huge sum of money because it keeps people out of the court system. But it also enables them to move on in their lives. When people are embroiled in conflict, they're stressed out, their health is impaired, it impacts their kids, kids don't do well in school, so there's this ripple effect."

As the organization expands its services, it also adapts to changes in technology. MCP is currently working on setting up an online mediation program that will allow people, such as active-duty military, to resolve

disputes from the comfort of their own homes and offices via virtual chatrooms. The organization hopes to launch its new online program this month.

Also coming up for the center is a 40th anniversary celebration MCP will hold April 13 at Hawai'i Convention Center, where it will honor a few of the individuals who have helped the nonprofit develop over the years. Wiltgen, who has been with the nonprofit for 25

actually 40 years of mediation in Hawai'i, because we were the first organization that provided mediation.

"The reason that I stayed involved and I think it's exciting is because I see the valuable work that the organization does. I see the difference that mediation and dispute-resolution processes make in people's lives, and the more people are going through our training, I think it's really exciting to see that this organization has grown and flourished, and



The Mediation Center of the Pacific (top) has come a long way since it trained its first class of mediators (above) in 1979 at the Makiki Neighborhood Justice Center. PHOTOS COURTESY THE MEDIATION CENTER OF THE PACIFIC

of those 40 years, invites the whole island community to attend, as the celebration isn't just for MCP, but for the entire state.

"It's not just our 40-year anniversary," she explains. "It's

become a critical resource in Hawai'i's community."

For more information or to purchase tickets for the celebration, visit mediatehawaii.org.

The Mediation Center of the Pacific holds regular mediations, as well as trainings for volunteer mediators.