

# no fuss, i'd rather discuss

A nonprofit brings people together despite tension, anger, and distance.

By Christa Hester

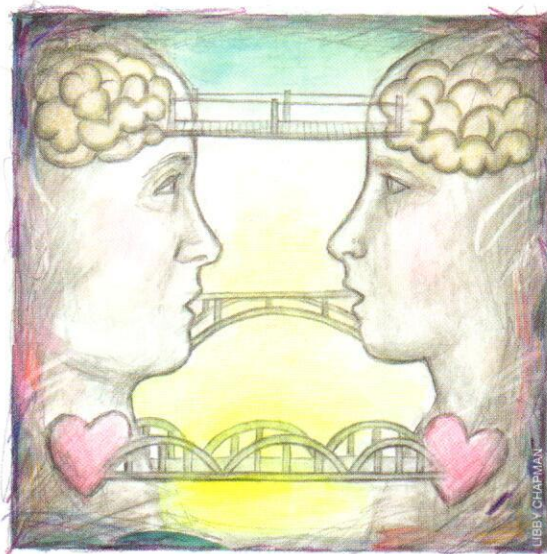
To keep the peace in paradise, the Mediation Center of the Pacific has worked tirelessly to minimize the strife in our communities. Established in 1979, the center's straightforward motto is, "Bringing people together to talk and resolve their differences."

The center began as a way to resolve neighbor disputes in Makiki, eventually evolving into the far-reaching organization that it is today. "In the '70s, mediation was a trend across the country," says Tracy Wiltgen, executive director of the Mediation Center of the Pacific. "Courts were overburdened and started looking for alternative ways to resolve things."

From landlords and tenants to criminal offenders and their victims, the organization works to resolve disputes at all levels – even disputes of its own. "An employer we were training once asked me if it was easy working in mediation because everyone got along," says Wiltgen. "We're human beings and all have conflicts, even our employees at the center. So yes, there are conflicts, but we adhere to the philosophy of sitting and talking it out."

The center has more than 100 volunteers who mediate and facilitate disputes in different areas. "Every staff member goes through basic mediation training," says Wiltgen. "The more people learn these skills and apply them, the more they can resolve issues themselves. Many of our volunteers pay to go through the first mediation training. If you ask them why, they'll say it's because they believe in the process; they see good outcomes in their mediation work and in their family and work relationships."

In addition to mediating, the center also has a heart for training mediators – both individuals and businesses and organizations. "Many companies want to train their managers, but also their employees, so that the employees could try and solve the disputes themselves without escalating it to the manager level."



Currently, the center is working on developing and expanding its divorce mediation program, virtual mediation technology, and its Kupuna Pono Program to assist elders and their families. "As our population becomes more elderly and many develop Alzheimer's or dementia, we want to support the caregivers," says Wiltgen.

"We had a case with two siblings taking care of their parents. One was in the Islands with the parents and the other was on the Mainland," says Wiltgen. The siblings used to be close, but hadn't spoken in a year and were in a lawsuit because the sibling in the Islands felt wholly responsible for the parents' care. Mediation got them talking, let them air their fears and worries, and helped them create a plan to divvy up responsibilities and find more resources to help their parents. "The powerful part is that they were coming up with their own solutions," says Wiltgen. "We just taught them a new way to communicate with each other."

As the Mediation Center of the Pacific works toward expanding its reach even further, it strives to stay true to the heart of the organization. As a nonprofit, "We don't do it because of the amount of money, we do it for the work," says Wiltgen. "One feedback we regularly get is that whether or not parties reached an agreement, mediation helped improve communication with the other party, which is what we're all about." 