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## **President's Message: Working for Peace and Safety in Polarized Times**

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Tragically, on October 19, 2023, Maryland Judge Andrew Wilkinson, age 52, was shot and murdered in his driveway only hours after granting custody to a parent. The suspect, the “losing” parent, had a history of abusive behaviors, including child abuse, stalking, financial control, and verbal assaults. A week after the murder, the suspect was found dead, an apparent suicide.

Our work is inherently dangerous. We evaluate cases involving sometimes dysfunctional --but almost always precious-- relationships between parents and their children. We negotiate and mediate with parents during their most troubled and vulnerable times. We recommend, fight for, and adjudicate family schedules and decision-making processes that sometimes marginalize or even completely cut parents off from their children. And while our reasoning may be valid and our positions made in good faith, for some litigants it is easier to blame the family justice system and its players than it is to acknowledge their own challenges. These attitudes are exacerbated by Google searches that, thanks to the algorithms of the internet, quickly identify others who believe they have been similarly wronged and advocacy groups that take myopic approaches to complex and nuanced issues.

As family court professionals we face many questions: How do we navigate entrenched high conflict situations? How do we avoid exacerbating conflict while still remaining true to our professional goals? How do we help mitigate family tensions and professional differences without watering down the truths we see and present? How do we attempt more peaceful processes in a larger society that seems so polarized, where demonization is prioritized, hatred feels almost codified, and truth is nothing but a nuisance? In the world of family law, this translates well beyond dueling experts, to board complaints, malpractice suits, media onslaughts, threats, and even physical violence. We all know the feeling of dread that starts with a parent lashing out at us personally. Can we do something to prevent and rein in the anger?

We must try, and at AFCC we are trying. As an interdisciplinary organization, our members represent virtually all perspectives in family law and dispute resolution. For decades we have addressed challenging conflicts about the most effective ways to address issues including relocation disputes, mediation and domestic violence, shared parenting, parent-child conflict problems, and child abuse and neglect –the most difficult problems separating families face.

Along those lines, last summer, AFCC quietly initiated a Peace Talks initiative, convening a small group of people with different perspectives on parent-child contact problems (PCCP) for informal discussions. In particular, we have been discussing the third rail of family law, looking substantively at our differences in addressing PCCP cases with competing allegations of domestic violence and parental alienation. Participants in the Initiative thus far include Drs. Peter Jaffe, William Bernet, April Harris-Britt, and Michael Saini, along with Hon. Denise McColley (Ret.), Peter Salem, and me.

We began in the early fall by establishing rules of engagement, designed to ensure a respectful process open to honest and open debate. Since then, we have begun working on substance, identifying agreements and disagreements, and working our way through a lengthy list. The conversations are challenging, but we are all committed to moving forward in a collaborative manner.

Several of us will be sharing our Peace Talks experience in a plenary session at the AFCC Annual Conference in Boston, June 5-8, 2024. There will also be related sessions on the program, and we anticipate further discussions, open to more participants, moving forward.

I hope you will join us in Boston the spirit of AFCC's organizational values:

- Collaboration and respect among professions and disciplines
- Learning through inquiry, discussion, and debate
- Innovation in addressing the needs of families and children in conflict
- Diversity in family structure and cultures
- Empowering families to resolve conflict and make decisions about their futures

Beyond those values, we can all agree that family law must be safe for children, families, and the professionals who work with them.