

THE COSTA RICA BAR ASSOCIATION AND ITS CENTER FOR ARBITRATION AND MEDIATION

By Walter A. Wright*

A friend of mine from Costa Rica, Diego Quirós, co-hosts a radio program in San José called *En Mi Trabajo* (In My Work). Quirós, who has a background in psychology and a strong interest in the peaceful resolution of workplace disputes, wanted to interview me about workplace mediation. In 2019, he and his co-host, Ghady Castillo, invited me to an interview during their regular broadcast in San José. They also arranged for me to give three other interviews and present a seminar and workshop at the [Arbitration and Mediation Center](#) (in Spanish, *Centro de Arbitraje y Mediación/CAM*) at the [Costa Rica Bar Association](#) (CRBA) (in Spanish, *Colegio de Abogados y Abogadas de Costa Rica*). The CRBA and CAM were two of the most impressive places I visited in Costa Rica.

The CRBA is the oldest association of attorneys in Costa Rica, a Central American country of approximately five million people. Founded in the 1880s, CRBA is Costa Rica's largest bar association, and its 29,000 members reside in every part of the country.

The CRBA owns extensive and beautifully maintained grounds located in San José. The modern facilities located on the grounds allow CRBA to provide the typical services a bar association in the United States provides (e.g., continuing-education courses, a bar journal, employment information). But the list of twenty-one services on the organization's website (<http://v1.abogados.or.cr/catalogo-servicios.pdf>) demonstrates CRBA's commitment to providing services that might surprise a visiting lawyer from the United States. CRBA's members can receive discounted rates on medical, life, auto, and home insurance; they can sign up for swimming, yoga, and spinning lessons; they can shop at a sporting-goods store; and they can rent CRBA's auditoriums, classrooms, soccer fields, tennis courts, swimming pool, and gymnasium. I have never seen such elaborate grounds for a bar association in the United States; instead, the CRBA's grounds have the look and feel of a university campus.

One of CRBA's most important institutions is CAM. Established in 2011, CAM provides education in mediation, conciliation, and arbitration; it also provides mediation, conciliation, and arbitration services to the public. Since 2018, CAM has provided those same services in labor disputes, as authorized by the Labor Affairs Directorate of the Ministry of Labor and Social Security. During the last five years, CAM has mediated and conciliated more than 500 disputes and conducted numerous arbitrations. In 2017, CAM's celebration of the twentieth anniversary of Costa Rica's Alternate Conflict Resolution statute was declared to be of national interest in Costa Rica.

In addition to being one of Costa Rica's premier mediation and conciliation centers, CAM also has established a strong reputation for quality arbitration. Based on that reputation, CAM houses the headquarters of the presidency of the [Ibero-American Center of Arbitration](#) (in

Spanish, *Centro Iberoamericano de Arbitraje/CIAR*), which brings together more than sixty-four organizations from eighteen countries. In addition, CAM has entered into inter-institutional agreements with the Arbitration Center of China. As a result, CAM is a major venue for international arbitrations.

Since September 2015, CAM's director has been Laura María Ávila Bolaños, a distinguished attorney, mediator, conciliator and arbitrator who once served as Director of Costa Rica's National Directorate for Alternate Conflict Resolution. Ávila Bolaños has performed more than 3,000 mediations and conciliations. She is ably assisted by Édgar Brenes Mora, whose official title is Assistant Attorney of CAM. The two of them made sure I received VIP treatment when I presented my seminar and workshop there.

Brenes Mora believes CAM's future is bright, not only because of its relationship with CRBA, but also because its position and structure allow CAM a high degree of independence, which provides its staff and neutrals the freedom to conduct themselves ethically. He believes CAM's biggest recent challenge has been to adapt its computing platform for the provision of virtual dispute-resolution services. Brenes Mora states, "As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, CAM has implemented online mediation, which is a key tool we rely on today to provide the high level of service the general public has come to expect from us." Asked about CAM's goals for the future, he replies, "Without doubt, CAM is building a place in domestic and international mediation and arbitration. One of the challenges we face every day is to engage the people of Costa Rica and the lawyers to create a culture of peace"

When most people from the United States visit Costa Rica, they think about visiting its tropical rain forests, volcanoes, and beautiful beaches. But any readers of this newsletter who are interested in understanding how Costa Rica upholds its long tradition of peaceful behavior would do well to plan a visit to CAM.

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