



Mediation Musings: Community

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A Little Community

My son grew up in Brooklyn; he was and is a city kid. Our block was idyllic, with kids running in and out of each other's houses—parents talking across low iron fences. When the kids were old enough, they'd lob a football down the middle of the street to a receiver, with a lookout at the other end to watch for cars. There were lots of great times, some dramatic problems, and 17th Street still seems like the best example of home to both of us. It was a community, with neighbors coming to our rescue, as we did for them, when needs arose.

We'd regularly go for rides into the country. If I had the time, we'd take the smaller roads. On one of those trips, I heard five-year-old D pipe up from his car seat as we passed through a crossroads in Ulster County, NY: "Look! Look! It's a little *community*!" We all laughed. He was joyful. "*Community*, a little *community*!" We asked what made him say that. "All these people—they have a community," he said. "They have a school, and houses, and a fire station. They have community helpers. It's a little *community*." I don't know whether to thank Mr. Rogers or a teacher for introducing this concept to my little boy. Over time, "It's a little *community*" has become a beloved shorthand for many nostalgic moments in our family, and a possible explanation for my son's predilection for assembling random groups of people.

All Kinds of Communities

There are a lot of communities. Whether a rural village, a one-way-street block in Brooklyn, a gathering of cribbage players at the PA club, a crowd of early-morning fishers on the beach, a Zoom meeting of colleagues across seven time zones, a childcare collaborative, a twelve-step group, a gaggle of online gamers who have been playing together since they were ten, a faith-based congregation, the 5:30 a.m. Woods Hole boat regulars, the third-grade teachers in the teachers' room, Wednesday clothes sorters at Chicken Alley secondhand store, the class of 1949 who meet every July 4 in their home town, and on and on. Lots and lots of communities.



In the classes I teach for MV Mediation, we have a few community-building rituals. A group that meets for ten weeks can become a temporary community; for some, the connections last much longer. As I put people into breakout rooms with a discussion prompt, participants make connections, find commonalities, dig into each other's uniqueness and learn in the process. The processes are meant to seek for caring, kindness, mutuality and admiration, ingredients that help to build community among course participants. We start out with a warmup such as "What's your favorite color?" or "Who are you looking forward to seeing?" or "What did it take to get here today?" inviting members to bring in their lives and share a bit about who they are. As we leave the session, everyone gets "last words." We build community by inviting all voices and supporting each other's learning and growing.

The Martha's Vineyard Community

I've been gathering some evidence of community, focusing on my adopted island home here on Martha's Vineyard. For those who read [Bowling Alone](#) and were horrified, I'm here to suggest an antidote, a takeoff on [Mr. Rogers' invitation](#), to *look for the community*. Building your community lens and using it widely can help when you are struck with demoralization. There's a lot of community going on out there; you can find it if you look. Here are some examples from close to home. I bet similar evidence of community is happening where you are, too.



This month, a [statue to Gus Ben David](#) was erected. An act of love and honor for a recently departed animal rehabilitator, naturalist and all-around great guy. Community. Andy posted that he is having a [community conversation](#) about the need for a venue now that the local music store/gathering place is closing. Community. The [local veterans](#) and supporters marched to honor Veterans Day. Community. Hundreds of people attended the [Barn Raisers Ball](#), a 31-year annual event commemorating the community building of the Agricultural Hall. Farmers organized a [food giveaway](#). The Food Pantry raised [significant funds to serve](#) one out of four local families. The Harbor Homes [warming center](#) opened for those without places to sleep. The Coast Guard [listened to local fishers'](#) guidance and pulled back on plans to remove navigational buoys. Woods Hole joined the Vineyard [and expanded the](#) African American Heritage Trail. Crowds gathered on beaches, parks and lawns to look [up at the Northern Lights](#). The Island will have an [islandwide vote, a first ever](#), about funding the high school building project. Community, community, community.

MV Mediation Community

You may be surprised to know that about 20 percent of the MV Mediation community is far-flung, and there are a few who have never been to the Island. This month you can read mediator Nicolasa's guest essay about the ICE raids in Allston, MA, near where she lives. Another of our roster mediators, Aisha, serves a university community in Baltimore, MD. Jess, who has been part of our community for many years, is immersed in building vibrant community in Buffalo, NY. Mary, our community organizer, mediator and staff member, bops around Bristol County, MA, as if she had a jetpack, going from court to family program to Chamber of Commerce meetings. We have members of our expanded community in about twenty states and ten countries. I even taught an Intro to Mediation course via Zoom in France. *Mais oui!*

Here on the Vineyard, we are immersed in our local community in real and meaningful ways. Board, roster and staff members volunteer at the food pantry, community greenhouse, town council, school committee, town finance committee, food equity projects, domestic violence supports, building projects, water committee, firefighters support, older adult programs, court, schools, homeowners associations, and more. This month we participated in the Borders to Bridges project, a gathering of those who are part of or in support of the immigrant community. We have many members who take the idea of community quite seriously.



Community Mediation History in the US

The history of community mediation in the United States can be traced through two adjacent tracks. One stream, beginning in the mid-1960s, was a response to the overwhelmed judicial system. The community mediation movement was a way to create more appropriate and accessible forms of dispute resolution as an alternative to the legal system, and to offer a set of services that could enhance access to justice.

The second path evolved out of the social and political activism of the 1960s, driven by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and seeking to place conflict resolution into the hands of the people in the community. The federal government explicitly nurtured this with the Community Relations Service (CRS) within the Department of Justice to promote nonviolent and constructive models for community conflict. A component of this approach was the school conflict resolution movement, where I got started, working to build skills in the next generations and demonstrating that student/student conflicts in schools could be successfully mediated by other young people.

The core difference between the court-reform model and the community-activist model was a difference in vision: while both sought better dispute resolution, the court movement was focused on expanding the menu of services related to legal matters, while the activist movement viewed mediation as a community-building tool, helping individuals and communities to become empowered and skilled as conflict resolvers.

Both Community and Courts

In my view there's no reason, now after over fifty years of slow and uneven development of mediation as a community service, to have to choose between court-centered or community-centered work. In reality, our work as an adjacent service to the court helps to serve community members at a time when they need our support most. Court-connected mediation *is* community mediation.

Because we are committed to providing excellent and professional-level mediation services, now officially in six district courts, court-referred could easily become the only thing we do. Court cases are a bit tidier in that they come ready-made and are referred by the judge or magistrate. We could simply respond to these needs and call it a day. After all, we are an underfunded nonprofit organization, with deeply committed and ambitious staff and volunteers. We could provide court-related mediation and say that's good enough.

When we settled on our new tag line: **•Education•Resolution•Community•** for our fortieth birthday, it was a commitment to all three purposes. As for **•Education•** our Conflict Resolution School is strong and ongoing, and an asset to the community, including the non-geographic professional mediation community. Our excellent mediators, coaches and facilitators are driven by the causes of conflict resolution; our commitment to **•Resolution•** has meaningful accomplishments to point to, day in and day out.



Some days I look at our letterhead and ask myself if we really have the right to keep **•Community•** there. We did help sponsor the Building Bridges Coalition, which offered the first (but not last!) Brazil Fest. We provide onsite information sessions for older adults at various venues. We show up when community events are happening and sit with community members who stop by to get some support or vent about unresolved problems. We march in parades and provide behind-the-scenes consultation for various businesses, municipalities and organizations.

MVMC Community Advisory Board

There's much more we could be doing to make our community commitment real and vibrant. I'm happy to say that our MV Mediation Center's Community Advisory Board (CAB) is getting some new attention and energy. We have commitments from individuals representing various corners of the Island Community who have agreed to participate in the vital work of monitoring the conflict resolution needs of our community. We look to CAB members to inform us about where they are seeing patterns of unresolved conflicts and to learn from them about how we might be of help. We hope to more specifically make real the **•Community•** in our tag line.

Conflict is inevitable, but its destructive impact is not. By deepening our grounding in the needs of our community, we can continue our work to strengthen the availability of our empowering services. Community mediation is an indispensable pillar of a healthy and peaceful society, toward the goal of more peaceful communities for all. Our vision of *An Island of Competent, Capable and Effective Conflict Resolvers* is a community vision for our **little community**.



If you are interested in possibly joining our Community Advisory Board, please send an email to info@mvmediation.org.

Some historical resources about Community Mediation

<https://necrconline.com/mediation-conflict-resolution/community-mediation/>

<https://www.nafcm.org/page/Purpose>

<https://2mediate.org/history1.html>

<https://www.aboutrsi.org/special-topics/community-mediation-basics>

<https://instituteformediationsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/CSJ-Community-Mediation.pdf>

Donor Appeal

We could use your financial donations, so please consider our valuable work and if you can be generous, we will continue to do **More with More.**

(Between you and me, we are a little drained from doing *more with less*.)

Thanks in advance for thinking about us, and we will make good use of any financial help you can provide. [Donate Here](#)