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Exploring conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Maine schools

Fall 1998

Opening Remarks *By Barbara Blazej*

I've always enjoyed this time of year—the vibrant autumn colors, the hum of activity as school begins once again (and my birthday rolls around right about this time as well!). This fall has been an especially busy one in the area of conflict resolution, diversity, and peacebuilding. Just recently, for example, communities across the state explored the notion of *alternative dispute resolution* as Maine celebrated the first (of many, we hope) ADR Week, October 4-10. Around the same time, the Maine Leadership Consortium sponsored a conference at the University of Maine that looked at the important and timely topic of youth violence prevention in Maine schools. And in a few weeks a group of us will be meeting in Augusta with no small task in front of us: Envisioning both the big picture and small details involved in creating a statewide conflict resolution organization. As I mentioned in the last newsletter, this organization will serve conflict resolution educators in various ways, and we invite your input at any time with questions, concerns, ideas regarding structure and purpose, and suggestions on how such an organization might meet your particular needs.

At another related event a few days ago, I had the privilege of working with a group of enthusiastic, committed members of the Peer Mediation Association of Maine, Central/Northern Chapter, which meets twice a year in Orono. These elementary, middle, and high school student mediators (along with their teacher-coordinators) recognize the importance of nonviolent conflict resolution, cooperative endeavors, and values of trust, honesty, friendship, respect, responsibility, and fairness. And they are willing to promote these values and skills among their peers. In the Peace Studies Program here at UM, I'm also proud to work with an equally motivated group of college students who have put long hours into establishing a campus mediation service, which officially opened its doors this fall. All of these students, from beginning 4th grade mediators to college seniors, in Maine schools and around the nation, represent the promise of a hopeful future. With the brilliant colors outside and the rush of enthusiasm within so many classrooms and schools, how could we not feel optimistic about the days ahead?

We're very pleased to include in this issue two articles written by high school student leaders and mediators, Stephanie Webber of Traip Academy in Kittery and Heather Fortin of the Maine School of Science and Math in Limestone. Thanks to both young women and to all of you who contributed to this newsletter. Please contact us if you have any comments or suggestions for future issues. And have a great winter!

Peer Mediation Roller Coaster: Traip Academy's Story

By Stephanie Webber

For hours, angry words flew across the table in the small conference room as four upset girls battled over a long history of insult and injury. I remember saying to myself as I left my first high school mediation, "I can't do this alone!" At this moment, I know that if a mediation program were to survive at Traip Academy, it would only happen if I could gain support from the students, faculty, and the administration.

I first became involved in mediation during my sixth grade year, when I was elected by my peers to mediate. While in eighth grade, I was chosen to be our school's representative to the Peer Mediation Association of Maine, and was elected the first president of that organization for the 1997-1998 school year. As my presidency coincided

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with my freshmen year of high school at Traip Academy, I was left with a difficult task— to continue mediating without a mediation group having been formally established in our school. I performed several mediations that year, which the school administration referred to me. However, due to inadequate publicizing of the program and poor documenting of the mediations, the “program” never took off. I learned that the only way a successful conflict resolution program could exist would be to try to install a mediation group of my own, to increase faculty awareness, and the involve a greater portion of the student body.

My sophomore year at Traip was a decisive year in our program. Looking for guidance, I met Mr. Dick Dennis, who coordinated a mediation program in New Hampshire a few years ago. He helped me to obtain a training grant from K-CAP; a local organization devoted to chemical abuse prevention. With this money, and some help from Mr. Dennis, I held a meeting for all students that were interested in or had ever been involved in mediation in the past. We held a training session for them, and within a few weeks of the training, the administration was giving me referrals, I was scheduling and documenting mediations, and holding follow-up sessions to check on the progress of past mediations. To increase faculty awareness of the new program, I obtained a block of time during a faculty meeting and presented the fundamentals of mediation tot he teachers and administration of Traip Academy. In addition, I provided packets of information on mediation to all present, which included referral slips to be made available in classrooms and in the guidance office.

Currently, Traip Academy’s mediation program is experiencing difficulties in terms of administrative support and student involvement. As a result of these difficulties, the program in not yet in full swing.

One of the primary reasons our program has foundered is due to the lack of administrative support previously provided by our past assistant principal, whole efforts to support a conflict resolution program have not been continued. My personal academic schedule also presents a problem as it has not allowed me the time to push for the program as hard as I need to for it to be successful. In the upcoming months, I hope to communicate to the administration the issues I have with the program, and the find further support from the student body.

Additionally, I believe outside influences such as EXCEL and Peace Studies, as well as inside influences are required to keep such a program thriving. If I am able to obtain the support that I need, I believe that I can take Kittery’s student-run conflict resolution program to new heights, to create a more peaceful living and learning environment within our schools.

I’D LIKE TO BE A MEDIATOR, HOW DO I GET STARTED ?

Mediators come from a variety of backgrounds including: counselors, educators, social workers, attorneys, clergy, etc. The Maine Association of Dispute Resolution Professionals (MADRP) has some suggested guidelines for practicing mediators in a variety of contexts. These guidelines recommend that mediators have a combination of mediating experience and training involving conflictresolution theories and actual role-playing for mediation techniques.Many Maine mediators have taken a course in mediation. The University of Southern Maine offers a certificate Program and private mediators offer courses throughout the year.

IS THERE A STATE MEDIATOR’S ASSOCIATION ?

There is, it is called the Maine Association of Dispute Resolution professionals. It is a non-profit association run by hard working volunteers.

There are currently approximately 100 members from throughout Maine. MADRP’s mission is to support, practitioners and educate members and the public on the work of neutrals. There are six MADRP membership meetings each year. Membership is open to everyone interested in resolving disputes. Madder’s primary efforts

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are focused on supporting practitioners the bimonthly educational meetings. In addition MADRP has a number of Committees such as legislative, ethics, public information, and newsletter where much of MADRP's work is accomplished. This year MADRP will reintroduce legislation to protect mediators' confidentiality. MADRP just had ADR Week (10/4-11) proclaimed by the Governor where more than 50 events were launched. MADRP can be an invaluable forum for new and very experienced neutrals and peacemakers to learn from each other. This spring MADRP's spring conference was entitled "Spirituality and Mediation" with Zenna Zumeta as the keynote speaker.

Peer Mediation Association of Maine Holds Annual Fall Delegate Meetings

By Heather Fortin (Central-Northern) and Pam Anderson (Southern)

The North-Central chapter of the Peer Mediators' Association of Maine held its first delegates meeting of the year on Friday, October 9 at the UMO campus. Many goals were set in action, and many schools were assigned with various jobs to be carried out. We decided that all goals will now be accompanied with a deadline in order to assure that they are accomplished on time. The following are the goals and deadlines that were decided upon.

Dues: Whereas only three schools have paid their dues thus far, we decided that it would be in the best interest of the chapter to give a deadline for dues. This is December 31, 1998. Any school not paying its dues on or before this deadline will face the possibility of being asked to rescind membership from the Association.

Logo: Adoption of a logo for our chapter was a goal decided upon in the May meeting at the end of the last school year. No ideas have come in. Each school affiliated with the North-Central chapter is now assigned with coming up with a logo idea. These are due no later than January 31, 1999. They must be standard letter size or smaller, and a clean copy that can be photocopied. Color is acceptable. Logo ideas should be mailed to Barbara Blazej on or before the deadline.

Newsletter: All schools are also asked to submit articles for the newsletter. We have tried to put one out every year.let's make it happen this time! All articles are to be submitted by December 1, 1998 in order to be in the first issue. A short synopsis of your school's mediation program, an introduction of your mediators, ideas for improving skills, any subject is okay, as long as it pertains to peer mediation.

Video: The Chapter has decided to make a training video. Brewer High has agreed to edit and piece it together for us, but we need scenes. As of right now, there are no particular assignments, but schools will soon be asked to act (and film) a part of a mediation for this video. Once assigned, the clip must be turned in by the given deadline. Some taping may take place at the winter meeting.

Winter Meeting: We have decided that the winter meeting will be held on Friday, February 26 at 8:30 am. Schools will be allowed to bring up to twelve students, including delegates and officers. Attendance is critical, as there will be many helpful workshops. The logo will also be voted on at this meeting. " Brochure: A draft of a brochure will be presented to us by the Peace Studies program at the winter meeting. It will give a short description of the Association and will have space for the logo.

Television Commercial: Many people at the meeting expressed genuine interest in creating a television commercial to bring PM/ AM to the eyes of the community at large. Penquis High School will be looking into finding information on sponsors, cost, network affiliation, etc. We also decided to table any action on this until a few of the aforementioned goals are accomplished.