

MISSISSIPPI MEDIATION PROJECT:**A Model for the Future of Conflict Management**

By Laurel Greenspan Kaufner

On August 29, 2005, as entire communities along America's Gulf Coast were brought to ruin through the unfathomable and unrelenting force of mother-nature, we were confronted with the fragility of life and reminded of our priorities. As Hurricane Katrina peeled away the roofs and walls of her victims' homes and businesses, she also broke down the barriers that divided them, and for a short but exquisite time, all men and women sharing in this experience were equal. The world watched as ordinary people became extraordinary in their efforts to save their friends, neighbors and even strangers.

The Mississippi Mediation Project (MMP) was conceived to sustain this spirit of humanity and community. On July 18, 2006, the first meeting of the Board of Directors of the MMP was held in a trailer on the grounds of what was left of William Carey College in Gulfport, Mississippi. The MMP was based on the guiding principle of providing locally sustainable programming to Katrina-ravaged Mississippi communities which enhanced the ability of residents to resolve conflict in a timely and effective fashion. David Hoffman noted, "Training people to manage conflict successfully will not only strengthen the fabric of Gulf Coast communities, but throughout the state."

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, perhaps more than any other disaster

in US history, the proliferation of commercial and non-profit enterprises has played the largest role in the grassroots community recovery. One of the significant reasons that the MMP, as a new organization, is succeeding where others have tried and failed, is in the explicit recognition that it would not undermine pre-existing economic opportunities of community members with the intrusion of similar services on a *pro-bono* basis.

In post-disaster situations, it is common to see an influx of well-intentioned volunteers providing free services to impacted communities. However, despite the best intentions of such volunteers, they end up undermining the economic base of local residents, (in this case, lawyers and mediators) who, in their absence, provide the same or similar services on a fee basis. Through a full year of careful and considered coalition-building and assessment before announcing and instituting programming, MMP leadership designed a program that not only earned the trust of colleagues in the community, but their support.

In early 2007, the Mississippi Mediation Project's core program, Essential Problem-Solving Skills ("EPSS"), was introduced through workshops in Moss Point and Gulfport, Mississippi. The EPSS workshop is designed as an interactive skills training to enhance the capacity of each



individual trainee as an effective problem-solver with regard to conflicts in his/her personal life, employment relationships and community interactions. Simply put, this workshop teaches people to communicate their needs and concerns in ways that can be better heard and generate more effective responses. To date, MMP has trained more than 40 residents of Mississippi Gulf Coast communities.

The Mediation Skills workshop, originally the goal of the project, has become the icing on the cake. It is the EPSS that has become the core programming and seems to be changing lives. Because EPSS workshops are so personal and interactive, mere participation in the workshop creates relationships among the participants and sets the stage for effective networking and collaboration throughout the community. Teaching people how to communicate, to understand the communication of others and to work together to find and meet their common interests, makes a difference.

MMP workshop participants represent all levels of cultural and economic diversity, with over 90 percent of

participants receiving full scholarships in order to make their attendance possible. We have trained directors and members of community-based non-profit organizations, elected and employed municipal representatives, local FEMA representatives, residents and representatives of the Mississippi Regional Housing Authority, community volunteers, small business owners, retirees, college professors, school district representatives, teachers, guidance counselors and high school students.

In June 2007, the first Mediation Skills training was presented to select alumni of the EPSS workshops. This training is designed to build on the skills taught in the EPSS workshops, providing a complete 40-hour basic mediation course. It is specifically designed as a personal and interactive skills training in a small group environment, which will further enhance problem-solving skills, while providing an informational and practical framework for neutral intervention in the resolution of conflict. The MMP now has 12 new mediators in Mississippi Gulf Coast communities and those numbers will continue to grow.



During a needs assessment trip in July 2006, MMP Board Members review maps of the extensive damage in East Biloxi with relief workers.” From left: Laurel Kaufer, Deborah Thomas, Wanda Payne, Sherry Lea Bloodworth and Amy DeHuff.

Following this training, community outreach regarding the availability of mediation services began. Almost immediately, the Mississippi Center for Justice gave the MMP its first opportunity to address a community dispute. Within three days, the matter was resolved. This swift resolution was brought about not only through mediation skills, but the relationships, credibility and networking between participants of the MMP.

Access to justice is a critical need in sustainable recovery. An increase in personal advocacy skills and provision of local community mediation services provides new opportunities for the poor and disenfranchised members of communities to find their voice. It also brings enhanced opportunities for justice to conflicts that are not appropriate for legal intervention. Kenneth Cloke evaluates the MMP in the following way, “The true purpose of mediation is to prevent conflict by building the capacity of people and communities to transform their

suffering into learning, development, and change. In doing precisely that, the Mississippi Mediation Project is turning our hopes and dreams into action.”

In July 2007, MMP Advisory Board Member and Associate Director of the Princeton University Ombuds Program, Nick Diehl, conducted a workshop in Facilitation Skills for 15 members of the Steps Coalition, a group of more than 50 local community organizations organized in response to recovery efforts that were not reaching those who most needed help. As Diehl observed, “[M]y work with the Steps Coalition is a prime example of how people with a common goal—in this case restoring the Mississippi Gulf Coast—inevitably encounter barriers to working together. As resources flowing to the Gulf Coast diminish, there seems to be a natural reaction of relief organizations distancing themselves from each other, with the hopes of self-preservation; a legitimate goal. Unfortunately, the result of this isolation is a

reduction in the collaborative efforts which will prove to be detrimental over time.” As a result of Nick’s effort, the Steps Coalition is once again a thriving group, moving forward with effective meetings, and member groups providing necessary services for their communities.

In addition to the continuation of EPSS and mediation workshops, the MMP is now engaged in a collaborative effort with several institutional and municipal organizations along the Mississippi Gulf Coast in creating pilot programs which will provide mediation services to community members. In coming months, trainees will be matched with conflict resolution professionals from around the nation who have volunteered to mentor them.

Recently, the MMP also completed its first “Training the Trainer” program. This highly intensive training program prepared a small group of carefully selected MMP alumni to lead EPSS workshops in their own and nearby communities. By January 2008, regular programming is intended to be fully carried forward by trained local personnel, under the continued guidance of MMP leadership. With local MMP participants prepared to provide both EPSS workshops and mediation services in their communities, the program is one step closer to becoming the first locally sustainable problem-solving skills training programs in the United States and the only active community mediation program in Mississippi.

According to Forrest Mosten, “Peacemaking, even when needed, requires creativity, courage and persistence. By

providing training in essential conflict resolution skills directly to the public and training members of the community to become mediators, the MMP has combined dispute resolution with conflict prevention, providing unparalleled support in helping people help themselves and their neighbors. This is a unique and replicable model for societal improvement before, during, and after major crises.”

In only one short year, the MMP has become a solid and respected program, recognized from local to state levels as serving a vital purpose in communities seeking to rebuild after Hurricane Katrina, and beginning to bring real change to the lives of its participants. In former Mississippi State Senator and mediator, Judge Charles Pickering’s view, “mediation is far superior to litigation and one of the best ways that I know to resolve differences. The MMP is providing new options for the resolution of conflicts in the aftermath of Katrina.”

The people of Mississippi are rebuilding their lives with hope, encouragement and support from others, but in the end, they must be able to do it for themselves or their communities and recovery will not be sustainable. The MMP is now an essential participant in that process.

To learn more about the Mississippi Mediation Project, please visit the website: www.mississippimediationproject.org.

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