

## Mediation Project Spreads Skills to Stressed-Out Gulf Coast

**By Anne Marie Ruff**  
Daily Journal Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES - When Los Angeles mediator Laurel Kaufer saw the devastation of Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast a year and a half ago, she had no idea it would offer a chance to fulfill her professional aspirations.

She just knew she had to do something.

She started rounding up donations of food, clothing and medical supplies, which she brought to a drop-off point.

When the delivery trucks didn't come, she convinced the president of Southwest Airlines to transport it all.

After a newspaper wrote about Kaufer's efforts, a Biloxi, Miss., woman who had arranged her own relief efforts read the story and recognized a kindred spirit. That connection led to dozens of telephone calls, a number of visits to Biloxi, and ultimately, the Mississippi Mediation Project.

The project aims to train individual members of the community in essential problem-solving communication skills and mediation skills. The first training session will be in February in Moss Point, Miss., 25 miles from Biloxi. Fifty people will be trained in how to better deal with spouses, insurance agents, government officials or displaced neighbors - anyone with whom individuals might have frustrating communications. Successive sessions will expand the number of participants and eventually teach people how to train others in their communities.

Steve Richer is the executive director of the Mississippi Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau. "One hundred percent of people on the Gulf Coast have some level of stress. People are waiting for insurance checks, or FEMA grants, plus they are driving around in a community where there is so much gone."

Richer is also on the board of the Mississippi Mediation Project. "Anything that can diminish the stress level and help us move ahead, that's good," he said. "Laurel is one of the heroes that come from other parts of the country offering support and guidance."

Kaufer wanted to offer whatever support she could to the devastated Gulf Coast communities but figured using her mediation skills to settle individual disputes would have a limited impact. She worked with community leaders and put together a national advisory board to develop a program that would be useful to communities throughout the Gulf Coast and that would be sustainable. City officials, religious leaders, school teachers and displaced residents have all expressed interest in the training according to Kaufer. The only requirement for participation is to be a resident or displaced resident of a Mississippi Gulf Coast community and scholarship funds are available to cover the \$480 cost of the sessions.

"With people being trained as trainers they can go back into their own communities and spread those skills," Kaufer said. "So we can create a web of possibilities, the opportunities are endless."

More than a year and a half after the hurricane hit, reconstruction efforts have fallen short of expectations on the Mississippi coast. Nearly 100,000 people are still living in 35,000 FEMA trailers.

"Under those kinds of stresses, it is easy to just get mad and not get anything accomplished," said Stephen Thom the former director of Community Relations Services in the U.S. Department of Justice, and a member of the project's advisory board. "Laurel's program is to empower some of the community leadership to teach residents to approach conflicts in a constructive and meaningful way."

As time passes Kaufer said the need for mediation skills only increases. "As we get further from the event itself and there is less and less observable progress, the frustration grows."

Despite a great outpouring of volunteer activity and billions of dollars from FEMA and government flood insurance, it will likely take several more years to rebuild Gulf Coast communities.

The Mississippi Mediation project has so far been sustained by private donations and the passion of Kaufer and her volunteer colleagues. "My intention when I became a lawyer was to help people," Kaufer said.

"And now, 25 years later, it's happening. I'm finally reaching that goal in a completely surprising way."



GERARD BURKHART / for the Daily Journal  
Los Angeles mediator Laurel Kaufer developed a project in Biloxi, Miss., to teach conflict resolution and communication skills as a means to defuse stress left by Hurricane Katrina.

To contact Laurel Kaufer or for more information on how you can participate in this project:  
[www.mississippimmediationproject.org](http://www.mississippimmediationproject.org).

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