

# A LIBRARY WHERE THE FIGHTING STOPS

## Can libraries serve their communities as mediation centers?

By Margaret C. Albert

**I**N THE FREE LIBRARIES Carnegie endowed for the city of Pittsburgh, a new mediation program is helping people learn to settle their disputes without violence and without resorting to court action.

The library took on this new type of extension service as an experiment, one that seemed to fit its aggressive outreach goals. Now, the results point to regular support of mediation activity.

In fact, the Carnegie's Mediation Project Coordinator, Mike Nash, sees a change in the community's perspective on a library in general. "It's no longer simply a book-lending institution," he says. "It's becoming a community center offering help in solving not only information-based problems, like finding the answers for homework, but also in resolving problems in human relations."

Carnegie Library Director Robert B. Croneberger is also delighted with the results. Formerly with the Memphis Public Library, he brought community-based mediation services into one of the system's under-used urban branches. There, he witnessed the therapeutic effect community involvement could have on an almost-forgotten facility.

Shortly after Croneberger arrived in Pittsburgh in April 1986, a chance encounter with John Axtell, board director of a local Mediation Center, led to a joint Library-Mediation Center proposal. Funding came from the Program to Aid Citizen Enterprise, a United Way agency, and the first library-sponsored training session took place that spring.

Today, three inner-city branches are home to the Pittsburgh Mediation Project, which trains laypeople to mediate "back-

fence" and consumer disputes, and provides the sites for mediation. The library also funds a part-time intake counselor to respond to inquiries and schedule mediation sessions.

### How it works

At least weekly, the library conference rooms become the site for mediation sessions. Neighbors negotiate problems over shared driveways, loud stereos, and barking dogs. Tenants and landlords work out compromises concerning overdue rent and property maintenance. Local merchants arrive at agreements with street vendors, and warring groups of high school students discover shared concerns that transcend the issues of turf.

For these sessions, shouting and angry outbursts are discouraged, but talking is very much in order. Participants are encouraged to speak freely, share their feelings, and—perhaps most important—*listen* to what others are saying. Communication is the essence of mediation and a major reason for its success, says Deidre Lev-dansky, executive director of the project's co-sponsor, the Pittsburgh Mediation Center, and trainer of the lay mediators.

"We often find that the 'presenting problem'—the barking dog or the infringement on somebody else's property—is not the real source of conflict," she explains. "A neutral, non-threatening atmosphere, combined with the mediators' skill in drawing out the facts and feelings in a case, makes it possible for people to work out their own solutions in a way that is mutually satisfactory.

"What's more," she adds, "the process itself becomes a learning experience for the participants. They leave with a better understanding of how to resolve personal conflicts and an appreciation for the value of communication."

The unique capacity of mediation to get at the underlying problem and foster an ongoing communication between disputants is what appealed to Family Court Judge Lawrence Kaplan, a founding member of the Mediation Center and a strong advocate of the program.

"I saw, in my courtroom, any number of cases that really did not merit judicial intervention," he recalls. "I was concerned that,

in my role as judge, I could impose penalties, punishment; but the judicial process was not really helping the individuals to solve the problems that brought them to court. In many cases, court intervention is essential, but when it is not, mediation provides a positive alternative that reduces the adversarial nature of family conflict and avoids the financial costs of court involvement."

District magistrates echo Judge Kaplan's sentiments, and several of them have become regular referral sources to the Mediation Project. Other referrals—and mediators—come from four of the six neighborhood organizations that first cooperated with the Project, before its library association.

Thanks to funding from private foundations, and the city's Community Development Block Grant program, as well as from the library and United Way agency, the Mediation Project can provide its services free to participants.

Funding supports the program's operations and costs of an intensive 32-hour training offered three or four times yearly to neighborhood residents interested in serving as mediators.

The volunteer mediators come from a variety of backgrounds—community organizers, agency directors, government workers, retired business and professional people, and housewives. Successful completion of the training culminates in a formal certification ceremony in Judge Kaplan's courtroom, followed by a reception for family and friends. Trainer Lev-dansky provides ongoing support as they take on their first cases. Many of the "graduates" have found the training useful in resolving disputes in the workplace and in their own families, as well as in the more formal sessions scheduled by the Center.

### Why the library?

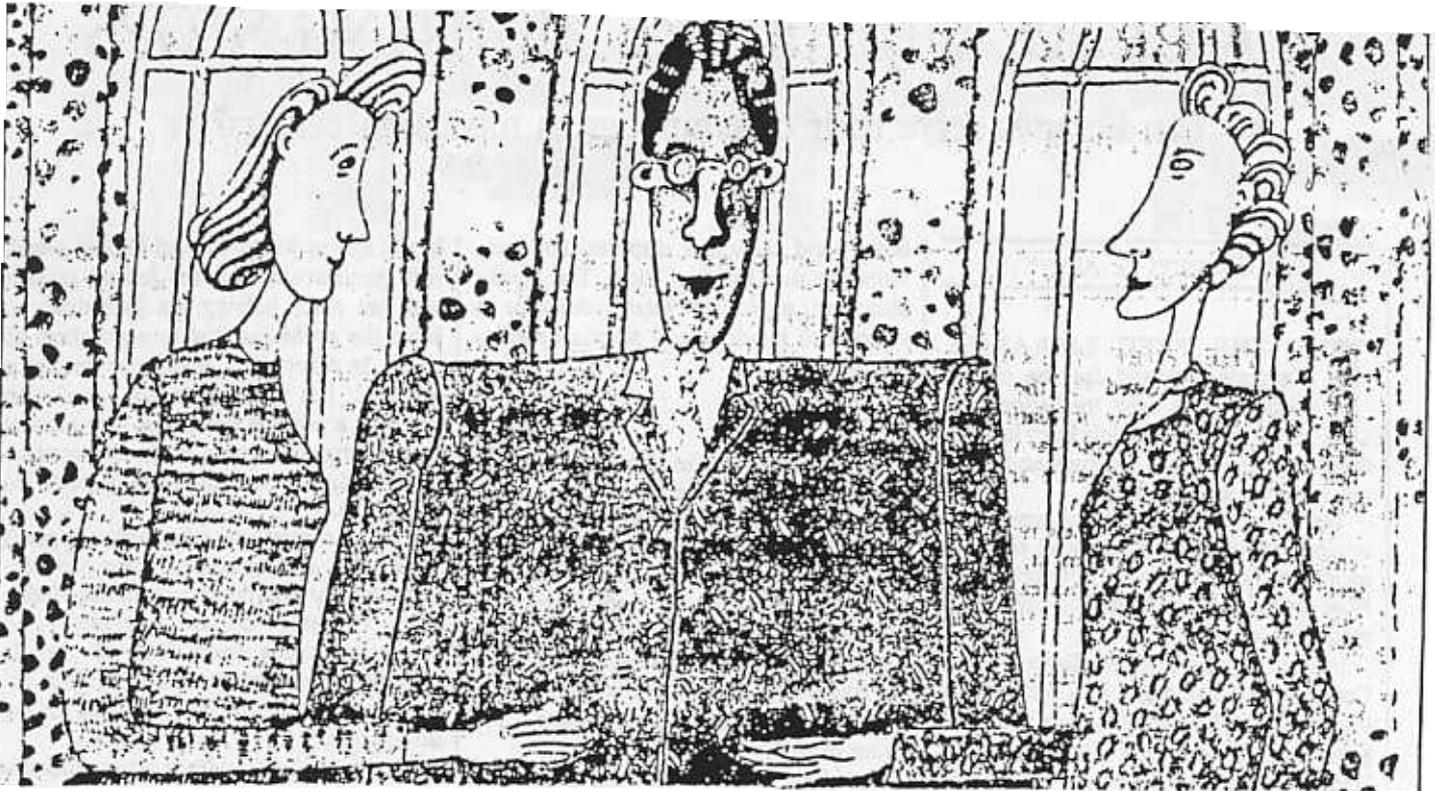
What does the library atmosphere offer to the program?

Oriental rug dealer Edward J. Lesoon found the "dignified setting" and the "aura of reverence" a positive factor in reaching accord in his case. Lesoon, whose storefront in a racially-mixed Pittsburgh community was defaced with spray-painted graffiti, was ready to take his com-

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A segment on the Mediation Project in The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh appears in issue 5 of ALA's *Library Video Magazine*, released last month.



plaint to court when the local development corporation urged him to try mediation. A black youth who had been implicated in the case agreed, too; he maintained he was innocent, but did not relish defending himself before a judge.

The outcome satisfied both parties: Le-soon agreed that the youngster, who had no money to pay for the damages, could discharge his obligation by performing community service work for a local youth employment program; and the youth hoped that his unpaid work would eventually win him a part-time paying job in the

program. Both saw the library as neutral ground, where the problem could be discussed without anger and "hollering." When the two meet on the street now, as they occasionally do, the exchange is friendly and good-spirited.

Project Coordinator Nash, a former community organizer who is trained as a mediator himself, considers such "fairy tale" endings the rule rather than the exception in mediation cases. Most people, he says, don't want to fight, and they welcome a way to settle conflict, particularly when nobody winds up the loser.

As an example, Nash cites the group mediation session that took place with two groups of teenagers from rival neighborhoods. The teens had been suspended after a violent after-school fight. The confrontation had arisen out of relatively minor incidents—but, as the mediation sessions revealed, the real problem lay in the lack of recreational activities for youth and their perception that adults—in the community and in the school—didn't care and didn't listen to them.

"I'm tired of fighting," one student con-  
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*(Mediation, cont. from p. 823)*

fessed. Others agreed, and the two groups agreed to a truce and began planning joint meetings with community officials and school administrators to address the problems that were causing their frustration and anger.

A similar outcome resulted when merchants and street vendors sat down at the mediation table. More important than battling each other, they concluded, was coming together to draft a proposal to the Chamber of Commerce for ways in which the business district could be improved for the benefit of all.

**Not meditation, but as good**

Nash also sees the library's involvement

as a help in promoting the program's legitimacy and community understanding of what mediation is. He recalls with a smile some of the first calls he received. One woman, whose source of conflict was apparently internal, was looking for *mediation* services. And a physician, hearing a public service announcement for the program on radio, wanted to know what kind of *medications* were being dispensed in the Homewood library branch.

Slowly, however, by speaking to community organizations and appearing on talk shows, Nash and members of the Mediation Center Board are getting across the idea of what mediation is and is not. Even when a caller's problem is not suited to mediation, Nash draws upon his social service background to direct the person to sources

of help. That, too, wins friends for the program.

Library Director Croneberger sees no contradiction in terms between the library's sponsorship of mediation services and either its primary mission or the famous non-conciliatory manner of its founder.

Nearly a century ago (in 1895), Andrew Carnegie gave Pittsburgh the library—and its mission, Croneberger points out. That mission was to be "popular and beneficial to the community." Mediation services provide significant benefits to troubled families and neighborhoods, he believes, and the library—through its involvement—is reestablishing itself as a vital and integral part of community life. □