

New mediation center opening in county

By Judith Doner Borne
staff writer

Your neighbor may be helping you resolve your next legal dispute — instead of your attorney.

It may cost you \$12 instead of hundreds or thousands of dollars in attorney fees.

That's because a Community Dispute Resolution Program, established by the Michigan Legislature in 1988, has just come to Oakland County.

Recently funded through a \$105,000 state grant, the Dispute Resolution Clearinghouse and Settlement Center, Inc. will open its doors March 1 in the Bloomfield Town Square shopping center, 2253 Telegraph north of Square Lake Road in Bloomfield Township.

"The likelihood is if we're successful we will be refunded," said Molly Forward, the Birmingham resident who is its executive director.

The non-profit corporation has been established to provide community mediation by trained volunteers to any county resident who has a dispute in the following areas:

- Landlord/tenant.
- Consumer/merchant.
- Neighborhood disputes.
- Disputes over money or property.

AND IF YOU think that local attorneys are unhappy about perhaps losing some of their business, well think again.

The American Bar Association created the pilot programs. Locally, the program was one of the recom-

mendations from a 1985 Oakland County Bar Association study of the county legal system.

"The bar association is aware of a general public concern over the high cost of litigation," Forward said. "Its members see this as a client service. If they can direct them into this low-cost resolution of minor disputes, then that client is going to come to them more often for advice."

The \$12 filing fee for mediation will be waived for anyone who can't afford it.

"Since it's a non-legal process they will be encouraged to consult with attorneys, to have them review a proposed settlement," Forward said. "Everything's confidential and the parties can still go to court if the procedure fails."

THIRTY-FIVE OAKLAND County residents are newly-trained as volunteer mediators.

"Everyone is very, very excited about giving back to the community in some way. There are social workers, school teachers, retired professionals, business people, account-

ants, company presidents," Forward said.

"It's very exciting. Many people who participated are involved in negotiations in their jobs. So we are bringing in some experience. Still, we provide all of the tools necessary in our training program."

The training which ran 40 hours over the first two weekends in January was directed by Edward Hartfield of the National Center for Dispute Settlement in Southfield and Marilyn Schmidt from the Wayne

State University Center for Peace and Conflict Studies.

"I've been to a number and it was one of the best training classes I've ever had," said Auburn Hills Patrolman Steve Eagle, a volunteer.

"It taught you skills you can use in life," said Eagle, who lives in West Bloomfield. "I've already used some with my two kids — and it worked."

The volunteers must commit one year to the center, working once a week for two to four hours, Forward said. As mediators they will serve as

neutral third parties helping disputants reach a mutually acceptable solution to their problem.

Those who become intake specialists are trained to listen to citizens who have a problem, and refer them to the appropriate forum for resolution — mediation, arbitration, attorneys, courts or counseling agencies.

For more information on dispute mediation or on becoming a volunteer, call the center at 338-4280.

...just what is mediation?

Mediation is a negotiation process where two or more people involved in a dispute volunteer to sit down together, in private, with a neutral person (a mediator) and allow the mediator to assist them in working out a solution to their problem.

A mediator is not a judge; he/she

does not decide who is right or wrong in a disagreement or force any of the disputing parties to reach agreement or accept particular settlement terms.

During mediation all parties involved in the dispute explain the problem situation as they see it and present their ideas for how they

think the matter can be resolved.

It is the responsibility of the disputing parties to develop and mutually agree upon a realistic workable resolution to their disagreement. The mediator aids them in this process.

— Dispute Resolution Clearinghouse and Settlement Center, Inc.



JOHN STORMZANO/staff photographer

The center's executive director, Molly Forward, says she has had lots of help along the way.

B'ham resident finds alternative to the courtroom

By Judith Doner Borne
staff writer

Once upon a time, when the visiting magistrate only came through when the ice melted, residents went to the neighborhood barbershop or community elders to resolve disputes.

Birmingham resident Molly Forward wants to go back to those days when we were a less litigious society.

Forward, a former teacher, is the executive director and driving force behind Oakland County's new Dispute Resolution Clearinghouse and Settlement Center, Inc., just established to offer an out-of-court remedy to a variety of disputes.

The center trains volunteers to serve as mediators and to give referrals to other organizations and agencies where appropriate.

"While I was home with my children, I did a lot of volunteer work. This is the perfect job — involving volunteers."

How did it happen? "I pestered," she said, with a smile. "It's a step to make it a less litigious society — to get parties to find their own solutions."

"I've had a lot of help along the way. Sometimes I think I'm just riding the wave of a very good idea. It will happen in spite of me."

SHE PARTICULARLY credits Bloomfield Hills attorney Peter Drollet, with whom she worked for a while. "He taught me everything I know about the legal system."

Forward, 40, left the teaching pro-

'It's a step to make it a less litigious society — to get parties to find their own solutions.'

— Molly Forward

fession to have children, then changed direction to become a paralegal through Oakland University, later teaching legal bibliography there. Her premise: "What can I do while my kids — Maggie, now 12, and Tim, now 11 — are in school?"

It has gone well beyond that as she often works 60-hour weeks.

Her legal credits are wide ranging. Her first full-time job was at the Oakland County Bar Association, then she was judicial assistant to Judge Edward Sosnick, first at 48th District and later at Oakland County Circuit Court.

She once supervised all district court mediation for Oakland County.

When the state created the Community Dispute Resolution Fund in 1988, she went after the money.

"The district court was very supportive of this program — they will distribute our literature."

Her background as a teacher keeps cropping up. She said most of us were ill-trained as children to resolve disputes.

"We never were taught that logical process of negotiation."

"Now, there's a move to put conflict resolution into the schools. Kids will know other than if disputes arise you must go to court."



Concert set for EMEAC

"Music we share" is the theme of a "Piano Concert for the Environment" at 8 p.m. Friday, Feb. 9, at the Lila Jones Theater in Royal Oak. It features internationally known Brazilian pianist Maria Meirelles.

Meirelles' program will include Sonata No. 23 in F-minor, Opus 57 (the Appassionata) by Beethoven and Valse Brillante in E-flat Major by Chopin.

Proceeds will benefit the East Michigan Environmental Action Council, a non-profit citizens' organization that focuses on environmental problems in southeastern Michigan.

"We hope everyone who wants a healthier environment in Michigan

will come," said Jane Williams, EMEAC board member and event chairwoman.

Tickets are \$15 and may be ordered from EMEAC at 258-5188.

Last year, the concert was sold out when it played at The Community House in Birmingham. Funds will help EMEAC expand its programs to restore and improve southeast Michigan's air, water and land resources.

Meirelles grew up in Copacabana and remembers clean beaches and water. "We share music in the same way that we share the natural environment. We need to join together to protect the air, water and land we share," she said.