

POINTS OF VIEW

Settlement Center aims for less litigious society

In recent days, I have come to appreciate what Birmingham resident Molly Forward and The Oakland County Settlement Center are all about.

My first real taste of litigation has been unpleasant. It seems that tactical barriers go up that keep the parties from sitting down together and rationally discussing the issues.

Well, we obviously can't go back to the days when disputes were settled at the neighborhood barbershop or by community elders, because the village magistrate only showed up when the ice melted.

Or can we? Enter The Settlement Center.

Information that more than 850 civil cases were resolved peacefully this past year through the efforts of trained volunteers comes as a breath of spring blowing on our frozen Oakland County tundra.

It's the fourth year for what was first called the "Dispute Resolution Clearinghouse and Settlement Center" begun by Forward and sponsored by the Oakland County Bar Association.

Now, the name has been simplified, matching the philosophy of the process.

And that voluntary, confidential process is mediation. The parties in the dispute sit down with a trained mediator, air the issues, and present ideas for resolving them.

The mediator doesn't judge, but assists them in working out a solution that is not legally binding.

Two participants in a recent case that was headed to Oakland County Circuit Court gave The Settlement Center high marks.

At issue was about \$5,000 worth of damage to Lynn Baginski's 1989 Corvette convertible that she had left for warranty repairs at a West Bloomfield



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Chevy dealership.

After charges and countercharges aired in the newspaper, the two reached agreement through The Settlement Center in January on a case that was scheduled for court in August.

"I can't disclose the terms. But I can say I wish we'd done this earlier and I can recommend a headline for your story, 'Corvette owner lauds settlement

center,'" Baginski said.

"It's a fair settlement. We're both happy," said dealership owner Jack Caulay.

And that's the key, according to Forward.

"It's a step to make it a less litigious society," she says. "People come to recognize they are the best creators of their own solutions. The minute a lawsuit is filed, it becomes attack and defend rather than solving the problem."

Although the center started out limited to small claims, it now tackles any civil suit. And where cases are complicated and involve big bucks, they recommend a master mediator.

It has expanded its space at Bloomfield Town Square and now also operates out of 46th and 48th district courts — as well as promoting conflict resolution education in local schools.

All disputes with the exception of those turned over to master mediation

are handled free.

How so? Because The Settlement Center is funded by the state's Community Dispute Resolution program. Two dollars is allocated from the cost of filing a lawsuit (so I guess we really can't do away with all litigation).

The rest is raised by grants and fund-raisers, such as the one upcoming.

Tickets are \$40 per person or \$75 per couple for "Hearts and Handshakes" — a wine tasting to benefit The Settlement Center. It's set for 5:30-9 p.m. Thursday at St. George's Cultural Center, 1515 Woodward in Bloomfield Hills and includes a silent auction. Call 334-3400 for further information. Our litigious society will be better for it.

Judith Doner Berne is managing editor of *The Eccentric Newspapers*. You can reach her at 901-2563.

High-tech systems become highway robbery

Ok, so call me a high-tech flunk out, a hater of the phone company, the car companies and schools that try to force feed us high-tech literacy. I'm a modern day Luddite who thinks micro chips are nothing but small potato chips.

It's high-tech hate. And there's a reason. The stuff doesn't work half the time and when it does, it makes me wonder why we even bothered to fix it in the first place.

I even started writing this column on a typewriter instead of a word processor. The reason is some line between Plymouth and Farmington or maybe Redford is down, what ever that means.

But back to the chips. Here's a sampling. One co-worker bumped the tire of her fancy Japanese wonder car on a

curb. The result is that it has been in the shop for about two weeks. The little bump put the computers that handle the engine, brakes and air bag out of commission. She's looking for a new low tech car.

After nearly a week, another co-worker figured out how to send a fax from his home computer. It takes about 45 minutes. However, the real revelation is that he has no application for it. In other words, you can do it, but there's no reason.

During the recent weeks of cold weather, I've been down with the high-tech flu. It started as a cough in my car and moved like a computer virus to my television set.

First the car. A van really. It turns out the computer that guides its starting ability doesn't like the cold. It



JEFF COUNTS

needs to be warmed up before it goes to work.

My mechanical advisor said the van is like most new cars, they aren't built for cold weather. Let's blame this one on some computer geek who lives in California.

But on to my television set. On a re-

cent chilly morning, as I was trying to tune into exactly how cold it was, I was faced with two remote control devices for the television. Neither worked. I used the old-fashioned method and walked over, turned it on and tuned into the weather channel. In four color graphics and with a map that looks like the former Soviet Union, the weather man told me that it was below zero, as though I couldn't tell by my frozen car computer.

My question was: I pay a \$30 a month cable television bill for some guy to tell me what I already know?

But on to the phone company, or what ever they're calling themselves these days. In our house we go through about one phone each year. The reason is that most are cheesy pieces of junk that break the moment they are

bumped or dropped.

By my figures it was costing me \$36 a year for a phone under the old rental system, and now it's costing me about \$100 to buy a new one each year.

But the phone company rip off doesn't stop there. It charges you an extra \$4 per month for touch tone dialing. That high-tech rip off means you'll be able to talk to somebody you probably don't want to in the first place about two seconds quicker.

Let's face it. High tech is the con game of the 1990s. It's like selling gold mine stock in the 1930s or snake oil in the 19th century. It's the buzz word that's suppose to make us empty our wallets.

It's time for all of us to check out what's really in that bottle of high-tech snake oil.

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