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Divorce Mediation Leads To A Lasting Resolution

by LeeAnne Aidt

The positive and transforming effects of mediation can have a lasting effect beyond the context of the dispute at hand. The beneficiaries of the mediation process are not always limited to the disputing parties. This is because most disputes do not exist in a semi-vacuum inhabited only by the disputing parties. There are family members, neighbors, and co-workers who may all be affected by the dispute, and who may experience a change, sometimes a profound change in their own lives when a dispute is resolved in mediation.

The following is a first person story of such a change. In this particular instance, the mediation community is an indirect beneficiary of the resolution of this family dispute, as the author of the story recently completed mediation training, and is a volunteer mediator with a community-based mediation service:

When my parents divorced in 1988, I was twelve. My father's girlfriend had called our house, and my eighteen-year-old sister had answered the phone. In my mother's eyes, not only had he decimated their marriage, moreover he had caused my sister to bear the burden of revealing the affair, and the damage was irreparable.

My father moved out and the divorce proceedings began. In Michigan, where we lived at the time, the Family Court was experimenting with Alternative Dispute Resolution, or Mediation, and my parents were referred there to work out the tangible details, mostly child custody, child support, and alimony. Parents may not think that twelve-year-olds are capable of noticing details in their parents, but I noticed a change in my mother immediately after the first Mediation session. Looking back, I think it was hope I saw in her face.

It took my mother and father six Mediation sessions over six weeks to agree to the details. Child custody, child support, and splitting of possessions were all set, certainly, but those sessions did much more for my parents. My mother started keeping a small journal titled, "Things to Tell the Mediator." I think it should have been titled, "Things I wish I could tell my husband, but can't." The mediator was a listener, even when my mom had something trivial to say, the mediator understood the value of getting every issue on the table. The mediator was a translator, and turned my parents' sharp, hurtful words to matter-of-fact passages. And the mediator was a constant, someone they could always call, and always believed they were capable of a resolution. I knew the Mediation had made a huge difference when I saw my mother and father after the last session, speaking together, on their own, before moving to their respective cars. It dawned on me how long it had been since I'd seen them speak to each other, possibly months.

Somehow, during the sessions, they started speaking to each other. And they still haven't stopped. The mediator showed them a blueprint, a way to communicate that has lasted to this day, and what has that meant for me? It meant that my dad was welcome at my birthday parties, he was a proud spectator at my track meets, and he sat right next to my mom and cheered me on at my high school graduation. Mediation meant that I still had my father in my life.



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