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## Moraga Mediator Making Peace in the Community

By Sophie Braccini



Larry Beans in his Moraga home. Photo  
Sophie Braccini

On any given weekday, you may find six people - two couples who live next to each other and two mediators from the Center for Human Development - sitting around an oval table in a quiet room. One of the six just might be Larry Beans of Moraga, a seasoned mediator who started practicing for the CHD more than 20 years ago.

Beans and his colleagues regularly find resolution and peace where there once was only dissent and anger, whatever the dispute - a fight over an obnoxious barking dog, or the growth of a row of trees that have begun to obstruct the view of one of the parties. Sometimes the parties involved in a dispute still talk to each other. Sometimes they can't bear to be in the same room.

Mediation is a voluntary process, Beans explains. "One party initiates the process by calling the CHD," he says. Someone in the office conducts an intake interview to evaluate if the topic is something that could be resolved through

mediation. Then they contact the other party to see if they will agree to mediation.

"We ask people to commit to three hours," says Beans. "We start by giving an overview of what we are going to do, and we set the ground rules, asking people to agree to stay civil during the process. We explain that we are not judges and that they will be in charge of the agreement they will come up with."

Beans remembers one case where three sisters were disputing who was going to be in charge of their mother's burial. "At some point, one of the parties bolted out of the room and my partner ran after them and was able to get them to come back," he remembers. Ultimately, an agreement was found that the three parties signed.

Beans started 20 years ago after participating in a 40-hour training program. "I remember how impressed I was by the quality of the people I met. Some of them had mediated for years," remembers Beans. Then he was paired with a partner and started mediating local disputes. "I started with resolving disputes between neighbors (community mediation); then I started guardianship mediation," he says.

One of the keys to successful mediation, Beans says, is listening closely to each party, reiterating what he has heard them say, and digging for the details and the emotional roots of the issue. "We try to get to the emotions behind the scenes and explore them. We try to help them overcome the dynamics and the feelings. If you don't help them enough with their emotions, whatever solution is found may not be long lasting," he says, noting that community mediation has a 75 percent success rate. "At some point we try to get them to talk to each other, and explore how to continue to communicate," he says.

Beans is now mostly doing guardianship mediation.

"It is a court matter, but the judge requires that the family goes to mediation first to work out their differences," Beans explains. He says grandparents often initiate the procedure when they see parents unable to take care of the kids. "A teenager once came to mediation (teens over 14 can be part of the process), asking to go back to live with his uncle in Missouri instead of staying with his separated parents who both wanted him, but were constantly fighting," he remembers. The parents were not able to resolve their difficulties and the young man went to live with his uncle.

Over the years, Beans says that he has developed his ability to listen and that his laid-back personality has helped. "We've had situations where at the end of the mediation the parties might get up and give each other a hug. That's a real success sign," he says with a smile.

Beans participates in one to two mediations a month.

"I do this to improve the relationships in the community," he says. "If we can be a little more understanding, maybe it will make a difference in the world eventually. And it affects kids' lives. If you can work out something for them, then those kids have a better chance."

The Center for Human Development is offering a 30-hour community mediation training course starting April 23. For more information, visit <http://chdprevent.server283.com/>.

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