A BRIEF HISTORY OF PEER MEDIATION IN SARASOTA, FLORIDA

I was inspired to write this piece by our good friend and mentor, Ambassador John MacDonald. Our friendship goes back a good 3 decades! I met him in my travels when I was a student researching peace studies and conflict resolution. I still consider myself a life long learner, as I was taught at the Union Institute in Cincinnati, Ohio, which back in the ‘80’s I was quite fortunate to be able to study a “science” or topic that was not being taught in traditional universities, which brings me to the title and topic of today’s article.

How did mediation first come about? Why did it emerge and why is it now being used globally in many different venues besides court houses? For example, universities now have ombudsman positions. Many schools across the U.S. and other parts of the world have a Peer Mediation Program to help minimize discipline issues. Many corporations and offices use mediation to solve problems vs. the old mindset of control and domination. While there are still many areas that do not use mediation, they are in the minority.

If we look at the idea of the evolution of consciousness that the philosopher Teillard de Chardin introduced us to, we can see why in the 21st century mediation is becoming such a useful practical tool. Is it because humans have brought themselves to the brink of destruction and annihilation? There have been those people through history who have shown us a different way, and because of that they were killed. What does this tell us about human beings? They are scared, and they want to maintain some sense of control, however, as many of us have learned over the years if we live long enough, we are not in control of anything except our thinking. And, herein, lies the reason for mediation; a safe place to be able to talk about your feelings, without being judged, and then through a more peaceful atmosphere, choose to think differently about your options when facing a conflict with another human being.

It is almost oxymoronic that today mediation is considered to be entirely voluntary however, mandatory in most court systems. The reason for this oddity is the dockets were becoming too full and in order to resolve cases, have a skilled trained mediator act as a third person neutral to help others hear their real issues, fears and concerns, and choose to create agreements they can live with or be able to change over time without having a court of law tell them what to do. This whole idea is somewhat simple, and yet very
complex because when a human being realizes they have some power to control their life through asking for what they need or want and be able to negotiate those needs, a whole new mindset emerges. Thus, the resulting success of peer mediation programs across schools and college campuses today.

When I first relocated to Sarasota, FL. in 2007 after teaching at Galen University in San Ignacio, Belize through Rotary International as a Goodwill Ambassador/Professor, I felt like I had gone back in time at least twenty years. Sarasota then was a very segregated town, and it still is but inroads are being made. I began to attend community events and even tried to bring the study circle model on healing racism to the city through the Community Foundation. However, while that idea never met with the success it did in West Palm Beach and Delray Beach, FL.; other programs did meet with great success at the local schools, beginning with Sarasota High School hosting Healing Racism Study Circles for male teens in the first series. These male teens were selected because of being their profiles towards violent behaviors. This Study Circle came about after a local shooting at the downtown cinema between a student at Sarasota High School and a student at the Sarasota Military Academy. The student flying a confederate flag on his truck was shot by the other boy. What resulted were four semesters of study circles first at Sarasota High School, which eventually included classes with both male and female teens considered at risk and then with students considered learning disabled who went on to make Public Service Announcements and create posters at their school to help end bullying and targeting students who were different.

Then the Military Academy chose to incorporate the Peer Mediation Program over a whole semester with a regular class that met twice a week and included conflict resolution principles. The goal of course is to help each school have a sustainable ongoing peer mediation program. I was introduced to Dr. Nat Colletta through Ambassador MacDonald several years back and it was in the past two years that we began to work together harnessing our vast experiences to come under the aegis of New College. Through a lot of hard work, persistence, and belief in the need and success of this project, the Peer Mediation program has recently become one of the arms of the Sarasota World Affairs Council, a 501 C3 under the umbrella of the New College Foundation Office. Through our collaborative efforts we were able to secure funding through the Quakers, the Southwest Coalition
for Peace and Justice and other caring individuals. Today, anyone can target their donation for this project. Other agencies that help to fund the earlier programs were the Center for Teaching Tolerance, the Rotary Club of Sarasota Bay, the Florida Learn and Serve Grant, the Center for Religious Tolerance and the Community Foundation of Venice, Florida for the Peer Mediation Program at Venice High School. We recently completed a two day intensive training in January 2014 with 18 Sarasota High School students and front line mediation trainers from New College.

In closing, my goals now are to apply for a much larger grant to be able to direct the Conflict Resolution Centre at New College which does not currently exist. With their new program emerging, Daughters for Life will fund twelve Middle Eastern women to study at New College. Through training our students to become front line mediators through Dr. Colletta’s course who are then undergo my training for the Peer Mediation program, we can continue to expand it to the local schools. We have had recent discussions with the County Mediation staff to utilize retired mediators to help set up the logistics at schools. I envision this program in every school in the county here. Eventually, of course, I would like to see it in all schools all over the world. But, as the saying goes, “Think Global and Act Local!”

Deri Joy Ronis, Ph.D.
Lead Trainer Peer Mediation Program
Sarasota World Affairs Council
djronis31@gmail.com
www.DrDeri.com