



MEDIATION

A Look at the Valley's Growing
Mediation Business

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LAW: Special Report

Christopher M. Welch

Mediator Offers Free and Affordable Services to Community



Christopher M. Welch
Director
Center for Conflict
Resolution

‘(Many) people currently don’t have the means to pay \$400 per hour for mediation. That doesn’t mean they should be denied the services that are out there.’

In the world of mediation, **Christopher Welch** is a rare breed.

At 32, Welch stands out in a field comprised mostly of individuals with decades of experience on the bench or as a litigator. Not only because of his age, but because he never went to law school.

Since 2008, he has been director of the **Center for Conflict Resolution**, which rents space from the **Church of Christ** in Reseda. The nonprofit offers dispute resolution with a Christian focus, although it predominately handles “non-sectarian” mediations. With the help of a county grant, it offers its mediation services free of charge at courthouses in Van Nuys, Chatsworth, Torrance and Santa Monica. Private mediations outside the court process make up between 5 to 10 percent of the caseload, and the group charges, on average, \$75 per hour, although the fee is based on the ability to pay.

Welch acknowledges it’s been difficult to build his mediation practice — even one that caters to individuals looking for a low-cost alternative to private mediators who often charge upwards of \$500 per hour.

Other mediators in the Valley have questioned why

young people would enter the field, given the importance placed on having years of experience in the legal profession.

And when Welch first got started full-time, about eight years ago, he often rattled off his resume to ensure skeptical clients.

“It’s still a challenge to get the cases and to get people to ultimately trust” my ability, he said.

The Newbury Park resident holds a master’s degree in conflict resolution from **Pepperdine University**, School of Law’s Straus Institute for Dispute Resolution, one of the most recognized dispute resolution programs in the nation. But his mediation training actually started much earlier in life, when he was a middle school student resolving disputes amongst his peers. One of his first mediations, he said, was resolving a conflict among classmates on the basketball court.

Welch said the career path into mediation seemed to naturally grow out of such life and family experiences. His church in La Verne heavily preaches peacemaking and he grew up with an older and younger sister, which he said gave him a natural desire to resolve conflicts in a non-adversarial fashion.

The goal of the organization is a noble one, and Welch said that’s what makes his work so rewarding.

“(Many) people currently don’t have the means to pay \$400 per hour for mediation,” Welch said. “That doesn’t mean they should be denied the services that are out there.”

Last year, about 40 to 45 percent of the center’s cases involved business disputes, either consumer to merchant or business to business. Just under 70 percent of those cases were resolved, he said.

Small claims cases from the court are a large component of the case work and could be growing. This year, the limit on what individuals can sue for has increased from \$7,500 to \$10,000 in California. Welch said he expects that to throw more cases into the court and, with a crowded docket, hopefully more into mediation.

The center, founded in the 1980s, is looking to expand into the community and hopes to increase its number of private mediations, although there isn’t a set time frame on that expansion, Welch said.

As for the young professional, he sees mediation as a long-term career that one day may lead to his own private mediation practice.

“I’ll just tell them I’ve been doing mediation since I was 14,” he said.