Networking in the Field of Conflict Resolution

Paul Wahrhaftig

Quilt made by Paul's children using some of his old tee shirts (2019)

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FOREWORD

By Martha Harty

My good friend Paul Wahrhaftig is one of the most respected elders in the field of conflict resolution and peacemaking, yet this book represents a perspective on “networking” that will be completely new to many readers. Paul’s long career coincided with the birth and growth of the field, and this is no coincidence since he helped very much to build it. More detail about the growth of the field may be found in Wahrhaftig, *Community Dispute Resolution* (2004). How he did this is the story recounted here, and it contains many valuable lessons for readers who aspire to understand and change their professions, societies, or world.

Google results for searches related to “networking” even with search terms such as “building the field,” go on for pages before diverging from the central point, one that we have heard a million times: Networking is good for your career! Who, how, when and where to do it, top ten tips—so many articles urge us to chat with strangers to see how they can help us get ahead.

While Paul chatted up a lot of strangers, it was not about his own needs or trajectory. It was always about how that stranger was working for peace in their particular difficult context, how he could help them, and with whom he could connect them to further their work. He did often ask them to write up their work for his newsletter, but this request was also for the benefit of the writer and the reader rather than some aspiration of Paul’s.

This is a case study in how “networking” can be used for altruistic, even idealistic purposes as well as individual career advancement. A person can decide to help build a field intentionally through working to increase the quality and quantity of connections among network nodes—that is, among people toiling in the field, perhaps feeling isolated and lonely. The person can crisscross countries, continents and oceans, compile lists (‘databases’) knock on doors, and drink coffee with hundreds of strangers, turning them into friends, colleagues and better practitioners.

This book is packed with stories, examples, and invaluable lessons about how to deploy the tools of the network builder. One such lesson concerns the importance of being perceived as ‘non-

aligned,' for example, when people from very different cultural backgrounds are trying to put on a first-ever event.

Another mission-critical lesson Paul illustrates is the need to let go of any preconceived norms about who is important or where or how they are working. He found the peacemakers in all kinds of places, watched them bond in unlikely ways (shopping!, road trips!), and learned that components he considered necessary for success were not.

I discovered the field of conflict resolution in the late 80's, and Paul was one of the first mediators I got to know (he was good at that). I am grateful he befriended and mentored me from the beginning of my career. It was thanks to him that I presented at the fourth National Conference on Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution (NCPCR) in Montreal in 1989 and the second European Conference on Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution in San Sebastian, Spain in 1994. (Both are discussed in this book.) Through these experiences I met mediators from all over the country and the world. Paul was the reason I co-chaired the 1997 NCPCR in Pittsburgh, which was the learning experience of a lifetime. He taught me about the practicalities of divorce and family mediation, published my articles in his newsletter when there were few outlets for them, and later invited me to join the board of his organization, the Conflict Resolution International.

I owe many of the highlights of my career to Paul. I am pleased and honored to introduce his latest work to you. I hope it will open your eyes to an extraordinary individual who has had a huge impact on the world's capacity for peacemaking, a capacity we all need now more than ever.

PREFACE

I have had the rare privilege of being a participant observer in the birth, growth, and maturation of the community dispute resolution movement in the United States. For over thirty years I chronicled the development and changes that took place as the field expanded from three or four early projects to hundreds of dispute resolution centers. My earlier book *Community Dispute Resolution, Empowerment and Social Justice: The Origins, History and Future of a Movement* (2004) documents this domestic activity.

That is not the end of the story. I have also had the opportunity of participating in and observing the spread and development of the collaborative dispute resolution movement around the globe. I was involved from the very beginnings of the modern conflict resolution period, in the early 1980s into the 21st Century. As founder and president of the Conflict Resolution Center International (CRCI), I found myself linked to some of the major conflicts and peace-making opportunities of this period: Northern Ireland, South Africa, and the Balkans. However, my links to community dispute resolution programs dealing with individual disputes have been as important as activities geared towards ending armed violence. Sometimes, as we shall see, they are the same thing.

The CRCI's role was to be a resource to people working in these areas. The Center's main tool was creating, sustaining and nurturing networks of conflict resolvers. There were few experts during the early period of spreading and sharing conflict resolution insights, either in America or internationally. Networking encouraged the dispute resolution pioneers to link with each other, to share knowledge, provide support and to adapt conflict resolution approaches to different cultures and situations. Reflecting on my experience in networking with conflict resolvers around the globe, I find it impressive how quickly and broadly the modern conflict resolution ideas have spread. One factor making it possible to disseminate them so easily has been the field's ability to adapt and modify these new approaches so they can fit the needs of vastly different societies. I believe that effective networking done by others as well as me was a major factor in encouraging flexibility and creativity in the field.

I will highlight key events I have been involved with that illustrate this breadth and adaptability of conflict resolution and the role of networking in guiding the expansion of the concept. I have three objectives in mind as I write. First is a history of how conflict resolution spread around the world in a short 20 years. Second is to show the importance of understanding and of flexibility as one moves a program idea from country to country. Third is to explore the role of networking in enriching, developing and expanding the new conflict resolution approaches.

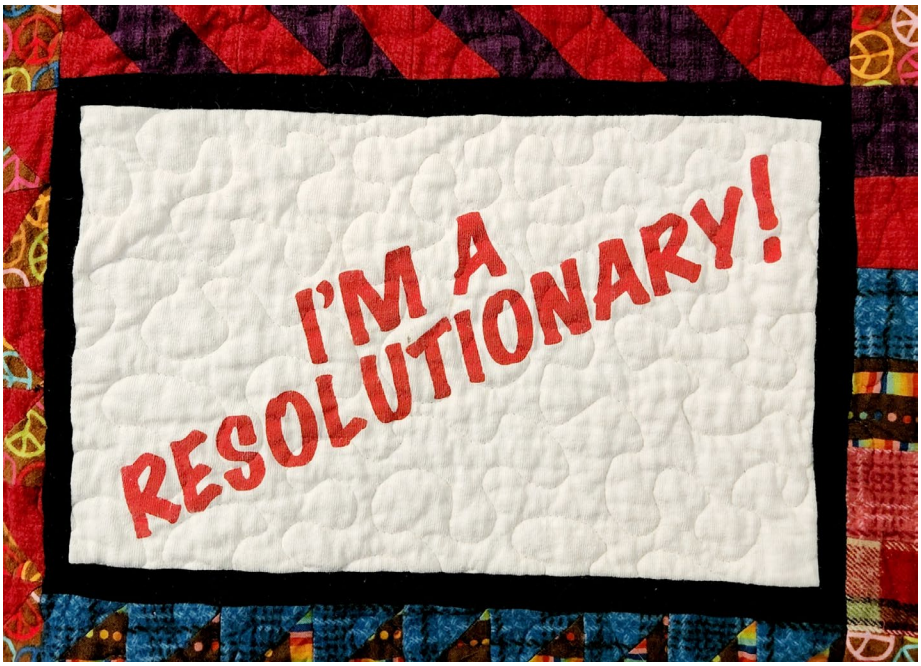
My motivation for stressing networking is simple. First, I believe that good healthy networks are essential to developing new ideas and incorporating them into societies. The more we understand how networks function the more effective we can be. Secondly, networking is misunderstood and for the most part is below the radar of most funding sources. All too often granters deny networking funds saying, “We don’t fund conferences,” or “show us demonstrable outcomes that will result from this activity.”

In most cases it is very difficult to identify, much less quantify, the impact of networks. If a network is effective, the *participants* will be more effective and will have an impact. They can and should take credit for the changes they have initiated. But would they have done that anyway if the network hadn’t been there? For instance, would the Good Friday Accords have brought an end to violence in Northern Ireland if Irish peacemakers had not participated in CRCI’s network, or had not participated in the Americans’ National Conference on Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution?

Another difficulty is that grantors usually want to see results in a short time period—three to five years. Often that is too short a time span to assess reliable results. However, looking back on thirty years of networking one can see a consistent pattern emerging showing that there is a tangible impact to networking activities.

The idea that conflicts can be talked out rather than fought out is a simple axiom that lies at the core of the conflict resolution movement. How that can be accomplished varies from culture to culture and depends on the situation. The story of the migration of modern conflict resolution approaches from country to country should yield insight into the globalization of human services more generally.

SECTION I: Introduction to Networking and the Emergence of Community Dispute Resolution



CHAPTER 1: Network Terms and Definitions

Before taking off on our journey of discovery reviewing the impact of many networks in the conflict resolution field, some definitions are in order. The best way to understand terms such as “network,” “networker,” and “to network” is with an array of analogies and metaphors.

A Network

Defining a network clearly is rather like the definition of pornography attributed to Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. “I can't define it, but I'll know it when I see it." Using a more sublime metaphor, networks are akin to cumulus clouds. They are those nice big puff-balls we love to watch cross the blue sky. We know they are cumulus clouds because of their puffy, rounded tops and flat bottoms. They probably all have a similar water content. However, they may be large or small, and their shape may change repeatedly as the wind moves them around. Sometimes they will

merge with another cloud and sometimes break away and head off in their own direction. They are never static; they seem in a state of perpetual change. Not only do networks keep changing, but the participants are likely to grow and change because of their interaction with others and exposure to new ideas.

A commonality of many networks is that they are non-hierarchical frameworks that facilitate sharing of information, resources and, ultimately, power[1]. However, as a network grows from an informal information exchange to a more structured entity, it may become more hierarchical.

A network may be large or small. A large example is MOVE ON's Internet network, which informs, coordinates, and inspires millions to political action. Families who feel rooted in a community do so because they are part of one (or most likely, more than one) tiny network of friends, colleagues, relatives, and neighbors. The network may have been organized purposefully, like MOVE ON's, or ad hoc, through informal chatting and growing friendship ties.

Networks evolve or are organized around common interests. Most mentioned in this book have a common interest in conflict resolution. Some are more specific, such as one dealing with mediation and conflict resolution in school settings.

There is a range of ways to structure networks. Traditionally network observers drew analogies to spider webs. In a pure network, as in a spider web, all the strings are interconnected, so a disturbance or message can vibrate to any or all other network points. Thus, anybody can communicate with anybody else or reach groups of people in the system. At the other end of the spectrum is a centralized network where all information flows through the central hub and then out to the participants.

An in-between form is the managed network or website. Under this model participants are encouraged to communicate directly with each other. The manager tries to keep the flow of information going by such tasks as collecting, summarizing and compiling information for easier access.

[1] Dean Peachey, *First Year Planning Report for Network for Community Justice and Conflict Resolution,* Manuscript 1986, p. 5.

To Network

This verb form of the word applies to the activities of users or participants in a network. There are three processes that commonly take place when people network: exchanging information, exchanging consultations, and developing personal contacts to reduce a sense of isolation in the work. A common method of networking is attending conferences, where one meets people who have an interest in common, to share information, contacts, or other resources.

Networker

A networker, to return to the spider web metaphor, is the spider. The spider creates and maintains the web—a means of bringing together people with a common interests. Fortunately, the networker, not being an arachnid, need not eat those who come in contact with the web.

Networkers employ a variety of mechanisms to accomplish their purposes. Dean Peachey, who spearheaded the formation, and became the first coordinator of, the Network for Community Justice and Conflict Resolution (now known as The Conflict Resolution Network, Canada), lists them as:[2]

- Correspondence
- Newsletters
- Computer links
- Meetings of participants
- Meetings of selected participants or planning groups
- Telephone and travel
- Resources/skill exchanges
- Directories of information or participants

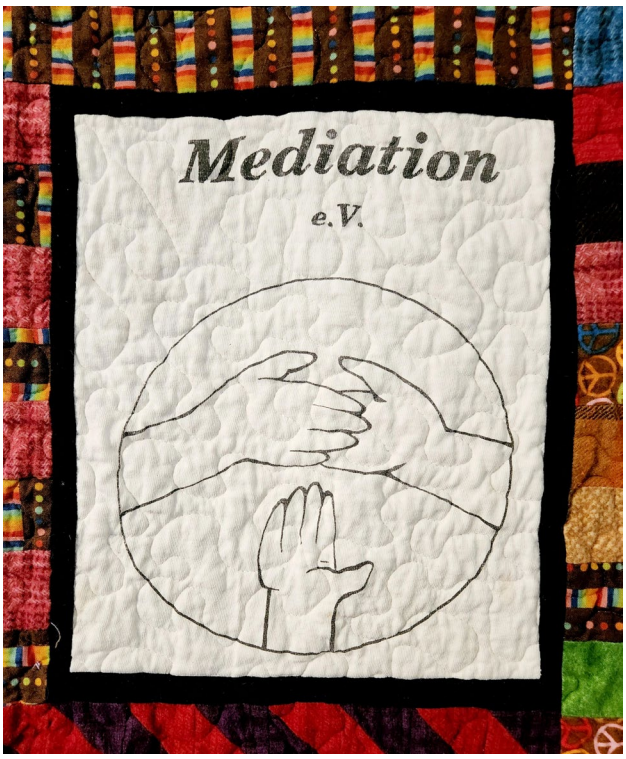
From my experience I see that these tasks relate to some of the skills or attributes of a successful networker, such as an ability to:

- Recognize each individual's worth
- Find creative ways to link people
- Avoid a vested interest in the outcomes or decisions
- Be sensitive to cultural differences
- Listen

[2] Peachey 1986, p. 7.

Examples of each of these activities and attributes will be found throughout this book. I have focused on understanding networking because it may help explain the rapid growth and transmission of the new conflict resolution movement. The timing may have been just right for networking to be effective, as people in many different geographical locations and social strata were desperately seeking better ways of handling conflicts.

CHAPTER 2: Personal Discovery of Networking



Learning About Networking

The year was 1966; I was a young civil rights worker on the staff of the Georgia Council on Human Relations when I discovered that I am a “networker.” However, at that time I doubt if I had ever heard the word or had any idea what it meant. My understanding of this concept grew as I moved through the civil rights movement, to criminal justice reform, and finally to non-violent conflict resolution.

I spent the summer of 1965 running a freedom school and promoting community organizing in the Black community of a small South Carolina town, Pageland. I was one of two American Friends

Service Committee volunteers who organized and taught classes for 32 children, ranging from grades 1-11, preparing them to be the first black students to attend the previously all-white town schools. Pageland was still highly segregated. While the schooling aspects of the assignment worked well, my community organizing attempts were naive and ineffective.

We had been instructed that our job was both to work directly with the students and to encourage community support for the students as they faced the hostility and uncertainties of desegregation. Toward the end of the summer we encouraged Rev. J.D. McManus, the town's main civil rights leader, to call a meeting at which we would kick off a parent's support organization. In doing so, we had ignored the fact that Pageland's tiny black community already had an NAACP Chapter, CORE, and Citizens League. All were focused on civil rights and the membership of each overlapped closely. The only differences were the people who chaired each organization and the different women who would carry the treasury (usually in a stocking in her blouse). Unfortunately the community was so grateful for our education work that they would not tell us directly that founding yet another organization was not workable.

Instead, they turned out for the organizing meeting and participated actively. We suggested that they select officers of the new organization. The participants disagreed. First, we should elect a chair of this organizing committee. That done, the new chair gave a lengthy acceptance speech. Then they started selecting officers. There were seven nominations for President of the new organization. The procedure they developed for voting was to run candidate #1 against #2. Then the winner of that runs against #3 etc. down the line. Thus instead of one voting and a possible run-off, seven elections would be required. Soon enough we understood the message: This community did not need yet another organization.

My learning from that experience was that I am not a natural community organizer. However, the following year, while I worked with the Georgia Council on Human Relations, I collected every relevant how-to publication on civil rights issues I could find, and mailed them back to my black community host and sponsor in Pageland, Rev. J.D. McManus. I also managed to bring him to

Georgia to meet with other small town civil rights leaders who had desegregated their hometowns fairly successfully.

Within six months of that trip, all public facilities in Pageland were desegregated and Rev. McManus had moved on to the next level of civil rights work, economic issues. As he pointed out, “It is one thing to be able to eat your hamburger in a restaurant, but first you have to be able to buy the burger.”

The conclusion I gradually drew from these experiences was this: although I did not have the skills to organize communities, particularly ones of color, what I could do well was to get the right people and the right information together at the right time. Then they will take advantage of the resources and affect change. *The essence of networking is being a catalyst for change.* For the next nearly 40 years, I pulled like-minded people together in networks to supply them with information, and to learn from and encourage each other in the struggle for peace, justice and human dignity.

Jump-starting a Network

Looking back over forty years of activity, the last 22 years of which included working on the international level, I am convinced that networking really makes a difference. That difference can be seen when we have the luxury of taking a long-range perspective. Networking over these years has been true to the metaphor that a network is like clouds—constantly changing, altering shape, size, speed and direction. The history of the networks I created, which I examine in the next few chapters, was one of constant evolution. Starting from a tiny network of just two bail reform programs, it was a short hop to becoming a statewide network of about 40 bail reformers. Then it expanded informally until it reached the entire country. Simultaneously with the national expansion, the network of bail reformers and pretrial diversion advocates began to shift emphasis from bail reform and pretrial diversion to the new topic of community dispute resolution. Soon it became a national network of neighborhood conflict resolution programs. Starting in 1981 it regrouped and emerged as an international resource center with a broad focus that gradually shifted from viewing community dispute resolution programs as criminal justice alternatives to seeing them as peacemaking tools in divided societies. With each change in the subject matter, or shape, of the network, it lost some members—

but many stayed throughout its constant shifts in emphasis, and new participants came on board.

One of my early networking experiences produced results within days. This situation was before the mediation and conflict resolution movement had started. In Pittsburgh, PA in 1970 I was working for the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) Pittsburgh Pretrial Justice Program. I was helping a coalition of African American activists to organize a bail fund. Such a fund, consisting of real estate made available by cooperative churches, would post the property as security for the release of a community member while awaiting a criminal trial.

Needless to say, such an operation involves considerable legal complexity. How does one best protect the church property with all these liens on it securing bail? What malpractice liability might incur, and on and on. Soon progress in organizing ground to a halt as lawyers on the organizing committee debated these arcane issues.

I received a telephone call from Friends Suburban Project, in Media, PA, asking if I could provide housing for some of their people who would be visiting a prisoner in Western Penitentiary, in Pittsburgh. When they came, I also learned that, among other things, they were developing a church-property based bail fund. They were plunging ahead, moving quickly into operations but feeling a bit nervous because of all the legal issues for which they had no answers. Their orientation was that it was too important a project to get bogged down in legalistic debates. Their focus was to just get started. They had no idea we were organizing a bail fund in Pittsburgh.

I put the two groups of organizers together. The media people got much of the legal information they needed, and the Pittsburgh group received encouragement to get the project off the ground and settle the troublesome details if and when they might arise. Within days both projects were operational, and the lawyers felt reassured. And in fact, none of the legal issues that had been worrying them ever arose in actual operations. In short, a small temporary network of two projects helped both of them to share information and enthusiasm and begin operations.

Becoming a Networker

Having experienced the benefits of networking, I found myself on the road to becoming a networker. I had discovered there were other groups around the state organizing bail reform projects. This discovery led me to begin learning by trial and error how to build and maintain a network. In a meeting of the Pittsburgh bail fund organizers[3] someone suggested that we hold a state-wide conference on bail reform. The Pennsylvania Attorney General Shane Creamer had just visited with community groups in Pittsburgh and had suggested an interest in supporting them. I was delegated the task of calling up Creamer, to see if he would walk the talk and fund this conference. I had only just met him at the community meeting, had never written a grant proposal nor organized a conference.

I called him, and he surprised me by agreeing quickly to what seemed to me to be a huge grant, $2,000 for a statewide bail reform conference. The conference, held in Harrisburg, was a success. About 40 participants attended and wanted to continue networking. They asked me to organize a state-wide entity. As a first step we sought to publish a newsletter.

Not only had I never organized a statewide program before, but I had no idea how to produce a newsletter. One of the participants at the conference was Bud Schoefer of the Philadelphia Community Bail Fund. He mentioned he was one of the founding editors of the Selective Service Law Reporter and he would work with me to establish a good solid Pennsylvania bail reform newsletter. Based on his assurances I agreed to the task. That was the last input I received from Schoefer. I had to learn the fine art of publishing a networking type quarterly from scratch. In doing so, I learned how central a good substantive newsletter can be.

I learned the art of gathering information to plug into the network. I found I had to go to the program and visit with the director. Further, if you really want to know how a program works, do not just talk to the director.

The volunteer coordinator, trainer or clerical staff may have a different perspective on how the program actually runs. I did not

[3] This organizing effort successfully established Community Release Agency, a black community based alternative bail program.

have unlimited travel funds, and in this period (1976-1980) we had no computer, no Internet and of course no cell phone. So the only direct way, short of travel, to engage in conversations with many participants in the network was by long distance telephone.

However, long distance telephone calls were quite expensive, and my budget was limited. Fortunately, I was able to negotiate an informal arrangement with the Community Advocate Office of the Pennsylvania Attorney General. This was the civil rights arm of the Pennsylvania Justice Department. They had a WATS line (Wide Area Telephone Service), a flat rate agreement that allowed the office to make calls for a specified fee, up to an agreed-on ceiling. So, I would save up my calls, walk two blocks to the Community Advocates office, sit and wait until the one telephone with WATS service was not busy, and then make my calls.

This arrangement underscores a benefit of network building. That is, the ability to share and thereby access important resources, in this case telephone resources, Ironically this access to long distance telephoning represented both a benefit of participation in the network and an enhancement to the network, because improving network communications contacts grew the network, which made it possible to use this tool more efficiently.