

# Company works with people to help resolve conflicts

By JEANETTE WOLFBURG

CATSKILL — Common Ground Dispute Resolution, Inc. helps people in adversarial situations come to solutions. It serves Columbia and Greene counties and has its main office in Catskill. It mediates civil cases out of court (with and without a judge's referral), runs workshops, coaches educational programs like restorative justice, helps with decision making for older family members, partners in school-to-workforce pipeline efforts, and raises funds to support its work.

“Conflict is part of everybody's life. It will not go away,” said Common Ground's Executive Director Dawn Wallant in a conversation June 17. “People are not always the best conflict resolvers. They need skills to deal with it, to re-establish control of their lives.” And Common Ground provides skilled mediators to help them. Its mission, says its literature, is to help “find a path from conflict to mutual understanding. By working to remove barriers to communication, you are given voice and

empowered to reach a common ground.”

Common Ground is a Community Dispute Resolution Center under the New York State Office of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), under the state court system. Cases involving actual or alleged child or spouse abuse stay in court, Ms. Wallant said. But in certain other civil cases, judges recommend the parties use out-of-court mediation. Sometimes the judge orders them at least to speak to mediation staff. If all parties agree, the case moves to mediation.

In conventional court proceedings, typically each side tries to get as much as it can, and one side can end up “losing.” In mediation, the mediator is neutral and tries to get a solution that both parties will accept. Mediation is confidential. In court, a judge gives the contenders only 15 minutes, but mediators give them time “to sit down and work out an agreement,” Ms. Wallant said. Furthermore, in court, each side brings its lawyer. In mediation, most people participate without lawyers present, Ms. Wallant said. However, she

added, when mediation reaches a final agreement, lawyers and the judge must approve it, in order for it to become binding.

All mediators must be certified under New York State guidelines. And Common Ground is one organization that does the certifying. Ms. Wallant herself is a certified mediator. Common Ground regularly attends Small Claims Court and Family Court to see what cases it can get, she reported.

Common Ground has a staff of 12-15 active mediators, Ms. Wallant continued. All mediators “are volunteer.” Most mediation is now by video.

About 80% of Common Ground's cases involve custody dispute, Ms. Wallant reported. But it also mediates problems concerning neighbors, housing, cars, workplaces, schools, agriculture, and miscellaneous small claims, according to its literature. Referrals from judges and lawyers are common but not necessary, according to Common Ground's literature.

A couple months after reaching an accepted agreement, Common Ground fol-

lows up with its clients if it can, to see how they are following the agreement, Ms. Wallant said. Sometimes the parties are no longer reachable. On the other hand, some people request further mediation. Some ask for advice on things such as vacation plans. Some people maintain contact with Common Ground for years.

One of Common Ground's programs in addition to mediation is for Parenting Apart. That program's purpose is “to protect children from parental dispute,” while “keeping children in both parents' lives,” even when the parents are not together, Ms. Wallant said.

Common Ground's school programs, tailored for grade level, include peer mediation, conflict resolution, anti-bullying training, and restorative justice circles. Restorative Justice is not punitive, explained Ms. Wallant. A person who does harm “must take responsibility for their actions” but “there is a way to restore from harm.” For these programs, Common Ground has partnered with the Hudson City School District and the Germantown Central School District.

Common Ground also works with Berkshire Taconic and Operation Unite to replace the “school to prison pipeline” with the “good school-to-workforce pipeline.” With this, it partners with Perfect 10, which helps adolescent girls succeed.

The NY State Dispute Resolution Program started in 1983. Common Ground started as part of Columbia Opportunities and later spun off, getting incorporated in 1989.

Ms. Wallant said she has a BA from Connecticut State University and prior to coming to New York was a paralegal.

She has been with Common Ground since 2001 and was vice president of the board of the NY Dispute Resolution Association, from which she retired in 2022.

Common Ground gets funds from contracts with the State Court System and the Columbia County Youth Bureau, and grants from foundations like Berkshire-Taconic, but donations are also important. It is holding a fundraising barn dance on October 5.

To reach Common Ground for services call 518 943-0523.