

BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT: CONSENSUS MEDIATION GROUP

- **Owner:** Lisa Collins Werner
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- **Web site:** under construction

BY ED MARCUM
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In a past century, if you had a conflict with someone, you might whap them in the face with a glove and challenge them to a duel.

Nowadays, litigation is the more common and generally less bloody means for resolving disputes, but there is an even more civilized way than that: mediation.

Mediation is cheaper than going to court, plus usually quicker and less stressful, according to **Lisa Collins Werner**, owner of Consensus Mediation Group.

"The great thing about mediation is that the parties really are the ones to decide how to resolve the problem, and the mediator is the facilitator to make that happen," she said.

Werner opened Consensus Mediation Group in September in a suite at Advantage Place office park on North Peters Road. She and three other mediators handle cases such as domestic disputes, employment disputes, breach-of-contract cases, real estate conflicts and others.

Anything from complicated corporate contracts to something as simple as a person trying to get a deposit back on a lease is game for mediation, Werner said. Consensus Mediation Group can provide mediation or simply do a case evaluation. The staff is also available to offer conflict resolution training and corporate coaching on dealing with disputes.

Consensus Mediation Group's offices are themselves a mediating tool. Many Knoxville lawyers offer mediation, but they don't have a place specifically designed for it, Werner



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After years working as a lawyer, **Lisa Collins Werner** decided mediation was a better way to try to settle disputes. Her company, Consensus Mediation Group, handles everything from domestic disputes to corporate contract negotiations.

said. This is important, because opposing parties often need a neutral place to meet, not the office of one side's attorney or the other.

The Peters Road office provides two large conference rooms and four smaller meeting rooms. Multi-line phones, audio-visual equipment, fax and wireless Internet access and teleconferencing are also available. There is even a small kitchen so parties caught up in negotiation do not even have to leave the building for a meal.

Consensus Mediation Group will also rent its facilities to lawyers or groups wanting hold mediations there.

The job of a mediator is to help different sides in a dispute get to the key issues and look for ways to resolve them, Werner said. First, she has the disputing parties meet in a main conference room and tell their sides of

the story. Then, depending on the mood, they can either continue talks or split up and caucus in the smaller rooms.

"Depending on what style of mediation you are doing, the mediator can either go back and forth, as a messenger, or can meet with each party individually and then bring everybody back together," she said.

Werner said becoming a mediator grew from her experiences as a lawyer. Originally from Oak Ridge, she worked for a time in St. Louis as an attorney representing insurance companies on claims and also doing civil litigation.

Then she started a legal staffing company that sent paralegal assistants, legal secretaries and attorneys temporarily or permanently to work for law firms. That saw her dealing with employment issues between her staffers and client firms.

Commission on Human Rights faced a case overload and granted a contract to Werner's company to manage more than 500 cases of employment discrimination.

"That again is a lot of back and forth between employee and employer," she said.

About seven years ago, she sold the staffing company, ran some other business and moved to West Knoxville four years ago. Now she has decided to make use of her experience handling disputes.

"I wanted to get back into the practice of law, but not in the traditional litigation way," she said.

Mediation has a number of advantages over litigation, Werner added.

"While everybody doesn't get 100 percent of what they are looking for, everybody gets part of what they are looking for, and because they've been a participant in the process, they feel much better about the result," she explained.

Werner has noticed one thing in particular about many of the disputes she has seen in 20 years as a lawyer and mediator.

"Many times in mediation, things get resolved quite quickly after someone simply acknowledges someone's position and apologizes, and that's one thing that is amazing," she said. "Many times, it's not so much about the money as it is having your issue validated. And that doesn't matter if it's a personal dispute or a business dispute. Emotions come into play."

Consensus Mediation Group is open by appointment.

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