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Lawyer leads mediation project one relationship at a time

Posted by [Erin Stock -- Birmingham News](#) February 10, 2009 9:21 AM



Michelle Williams/Birmingham News

Michelle Obradovic, director of the District Court Mediation Project, spends her more than 40 hours a week volunteering her services mediating and training other attorneys in mediation. She greets fellow lawyer Jay Holloway in the hallway between sessions. [More photos](#)

Michelle Obradovic, a court mediator in Jefferson County, started settling disputes at age 4.

The way her grandparents used to tell it, Obradovic intervened when an angry customer at their grocery store in Talladega County complained about the cold cuts she had been sold.

"I climbed up on the counter using my step ladder," Obradovic recalls her grandparents saying, "and asked her if I could give her my candy bracelet, if that would make it better."

Now, a 39-year-old Obradovic sits down with litigants at the Jefferson County courthouse and helps them resolve their disputes outside of court - often for free. She gives 40 to 50 hours of her time a week, mediating cases and directing the Jefferson County Court Mediation Project.

Founded by Obradovic in 1999 with grant money, the project provides

attorney mediators at no charge to people who cannot afford to hire their own. It started out in district court with small claims cases, and several hundred attorneys have volunteered since then. Obradovic is now piloting the program for criminal and civil cases in circuit court.

"I think there's one thing I've ever done in my life that I'm good at, and it's this," said Obradovic, referring to her conflict resolution work. "I have to, because it's my calling, whether I want to do it or not."

Obradovic, who also runs a private practice, does not bargain with candy bracelets anymore. Her new methods apparently work. She has a 97 percent success rate settling property tax appeal cases. And she is considered one of the best mediators in the business, according to Juandalynn Givan, a fellow mediator who also volunteers with the mediation project.

Givan said Obradovic taught her how to assess a dispute, understand the parties and gain control over a situation. Obradovic handles each case differently, but Givan said "she has a tendency to make everybody feel as if they're important." The 5-foot-1 blonde is forceful, too, and said she does not simply serve as a message carrier between parties.

Obradovic said she was raised by her grandparents because her parents were mentally ill and abusive. Even then, she said, she had a tendency to stay calm and seek resolutions. That experience helps her when violence sometimes enters the disputes she mediates now.

"When people shout at me, or get in my face or put their hands on me, it doesn't frighten me," she said. [MORE](#)

District Court Mediation Project

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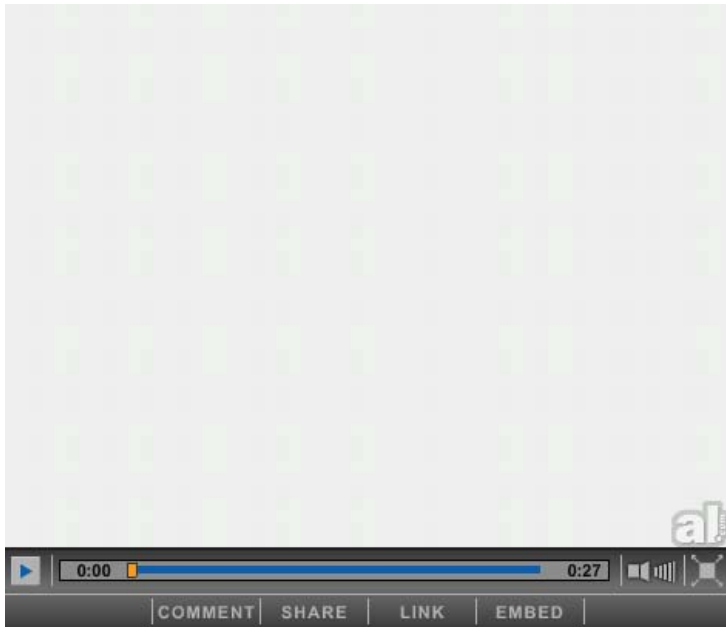
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I never, ever thought I'd have anything good to say about a lawyer, but she seems like she's bent and determined to make a difference. Keep up the good work!

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