

Vicki Shemin Interview : Academy of Professional Family Mediators

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Vicki Shemin – an interview

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1) Who are you? Where do you come from? What is your background?

I hail from Little Rock, Arkansas, which in no small part explains why I am so excited that our APFM 2017 Family Mediation Conference will be in Memphis (a city near and dear to my heart as I visited my “kin” there a lot as a child and remember with fondness how great the BBQ is!). I am a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of The Johns Hopkins University (and am proud to say that I was part of the first class of women to matriculate). After college graduation,

I received my MSW from the University of Maryland School of Social Work and Community Planning, practiced as a social worker for 10 years and then graduated cum laude from the Boston University School of Law. Given my background as a clinical social worker, I naturally gravitated towards family law as it's a natural fit.

2) What do your current professional practice and activities look like?

In addition to having a full-time practice in mediation and collaborative law (with a sworn promise not to represent clients in a litigious process), I am currently Vice President of the Massachusetts Council on Family Mediation (“MCFM”) and am on the Professional Development Committee of the Massachusetts Collaborative Law Council (“MCLC”), as well as co-chair of the Joint MCFM-MCLC Committee. In addition, I am a volunteer mentor/coach to local mediation training organizations – a richly rewarding experience.

Since I love being part of the academic community, I have taught courses in “Negotiation” at Northeastern University’s D’Amore-McKim School of Business and have also taught “Family Law” and “Ethics” at Boston University School of Social Work. I love writing as well and am in the midst of working on a cutting-edge research project entitled, **LETTERS TO EX-SPOUSES:...AND I JUST WANTED YOU TO KNOW**. The premise behind the research is to ask divorced individuals (I am almost at my goal of having 300 respondents!) to write a letter to their ex-spouse now, for the first

time, with no intention of necessarily sending the letter. Accompanying the letter is a brief survey to assist in research cataloging (e.g., how long were you married?; did you have children together?; how long has it been since you were divorced? did your marriage end amicably/litigiously?). The purpose behind the research is three-fold: (1) to help give a sense of closure and perspective to the letter-writer; (2) for those contemplating marriage, remarriage, or divorce, to learn from the first-hand experiences of others; and (3) for all professionals who are involved in the divorce process to learn from those whose lives are impacted by their professional involvement (including judges, lawyers, mediators, therapists, and clergy).

3) How did you first learn about mediation?

I am privileged to practice in a state where the courts and professional practitioners have long embraced new avenues of dispute resolution. I probably was first introduced to mediation in 1977 (my entry into the professional world of social work), although it had different nomenclature back then. My formal family law mediation training dates back to 1995, when I was fortunate to take my initial certification training from legendary mediator John Fiske.

4) What do you hope to accomplish as a Board Member of APFM?

My hope is to bring energy and creativity to the Board in areas that the Board has identified for its own short-term and long-term goals. Some of these goals include making further inroads in areas such as demonstrating how mediation can be a viable (or even preferable) go-to dispute resolution tool, establishing and maintaining a standardized and high bar for standards/competency certification for the family mediator (which would enable newer practitioners to have increased mentoring opportunities), and, finally, spreading the gospel to the public about the marvels of mediation.

5) Where do you see the field of Family Mediation going?

Undoubtedly, the future of the field of Family Mediation is bright, as the horizon for limitless possibilities is within our vision and grasp. At the same time, borrowing the child development analogy, I see the field of family mediation as in its adolescence; in part because, while family mediation looks towards a limitless future, the profession must also mature under the watchful eyes of stewards and fellow practitioners in order to ensure well-considered standards, practices, ethics, competencies and boundaries.

As an active member of both the mediation and collaborative law communities, I believe that one interesting direction for the future of Family Mediation is to ascertain how cross-pollination can be of benefit to both professions. There are inexhaustible opportunities for taking a “best of both worlds” approach to advance the field of Family Mediation.

Moreover, I would like practitioners to continue to push the boundaries of what is encompassed under the expansive umbrella of Family Mediation – prenuptial/postnuptial agreements; planning for separation/divorce; family succession planning; intra-familial estate planning; working with nontraditional and extended families; avoiding probate contests; end-of-life decisions; guardianships and conservators – to name a few.

6) What do you like to do when you are not mediating?

The older I get, the more it feels like I am constantly mediating, internally, even if I am not doing so outwardly! When I am not having an inner or out-of-body mediating experience, I am a devotee of board games, canasta (I am a certified instructor), film, knitting and needlepoint.