

# Front Porch

Delivered to Stapleton, Park Hill, Lowry, Monclair, Mayfair, Hale and East Colfax neighborhoods

STAPLETON

## Fighting Across the Fence: How to Deal with Neighbor Conflicts

October 1, 2014 / Madeline Schroeder / [Community Issues](#) /



Due to confidentiality, the Front Porch could not photograph a real mediation session. However, professional mediators (left to right) Maisha Fields, Suzanne Chambers-Yates and Bill Murphy were happy to theatrically reenact a session at the Wellington Webb building, one of the many locations where they host mediations.

Front Porch photo by Madeline Schroeder.

Perhaps it's the way they cut their grass, or the color of their house, or the stereo system late at night. Neighbor conflicts happen and there are several ways to resolve them. Some ways are better than others.

“Issues can easily escalate,” says Michelle Lee, founder of Harmony Management Group, which specializes in HOA management solutions. She oversees 40 units in Denver, including 17 in Stapleton.

In her eight years, Lee has dealt with attorneys and distressed neighbors over all sorts of issues—meth, drainage, dog poop, and the infamous 2012 sidewalk chalk incident in Stapleton. A neighbor became frustrated when kids drew chalk in the courtyard up to his doorway and he tracked it into his house. Lee emailed neighbors on the courtyard to suggest not using chalk in the common areas. “It blew out of proportion,” she says, referring to the national attention she received for “squashing children’s creativity.”

“I do my best to understand the needs of the people,” she says.

She has seen more issues in Stapleton than any other area, a result of shared community spaces, she says. For example, people have a hard time compromising on the courtyards’ planter boxes: “If it’s collard greens, well, I’m not touching that. I’m only maintaining chives,” she imitates.

Bringing up an issue to a neighbor is much easier when there is some sort of established relationship, she says.

Steve Charbonneau thinks people have such busy lives they don’t always take the time to get to know their neighbors anymore. To help people living next to each other resolve issues in a constructive way, Charbonneau founded Community Mediation Concepts 18 years ago.

Community Mediation Concepts is a nonprofit that contracts with the city of Denver and is a free service to Denver residents. They also contract with municipalities in Boulder, Thornton and Aurora. They resolve issues ranging from landscaping to pets to noise. They average 450–500 referrals every year.

“These are people’s homes. They work hard every day. When they come home they want some peace and quiet, so issues can wear on them after a while,” he says. He’s seen people do crazy things when their quality of life is challenged, like a man who poured gasoline down his property line and lit it on fire to keep neighbors away.

Mediators have a master’s or PhD in conflict resolution. When a neighbor calls, a mediator asks a few questions and contacts every person involved. There is no limit to the number of people they work with. Charbonneau once worked with an entire cul-de-sac of Stapleton residents who were frustrated with a neighbor revving his racecar on weekend mornings.

If the parties agree to mediate, the group meets in a neutral location for 60 to 90 minutes. The mediator listens to concerns and discusses new solutions. “It’s amazing how people can work these things out if they just sit down and have a conversation. Many haven’t tried having a civil conversation before calling us,” Charbonneau says.

At times, meetings can get heated and mediators have to talk to parties individually. Professional mediator Bill Murphy, who has 18 years of experience, recalls a session in which one person said to the other, “Maybe you just need to get laid.”

“Mediations force you to work with your ego and learn to cooperate,” mediator Maisha Fields says. “We have worked with very high-up figures in Denver and surprisingly sometimes they don’t have the best communication or conflict-resolution skills,” says mediator Suzanne Chambers-Yates.

During the interview the three mediators were sitting in an office at the Wellington Webb building, one of the many locations where they host meetings. With increasing momentum, they reel off stories of the different conflicts they've encountered and the resolution reached. At times they laugh or drop their jaws hearing each other's experiences. At the end, Murphy says, "Needless to say, we *love* our job."

They end every mediation with a written agreement and follow up with the parties after 30 to 45 days. If the conflict is not resolved, they will meet again, although that has only happened four or five times. To learn more or to schedule a mediation, email [CMC@FindSolutions.org](mailto:CMC@FindSolutions.org), call 303.651.6534 or visit - <http://www.findsolutions.org/>.