

# MEDIATING HER WAY TO A NEW CAREER

by Laura Whyte

WHEN KAREN LE BLANC WAS A Journalism student she missed many classes to attend court proceedings and support battles on behalf of her three children.

Since graduating in 2008, she's managed to blend what she learned from those experiences with her communication training and the result is her recent success as a family mediator.

As a mediator, Le Blanc helps families going through separation or divorce have difficult conversations and reach new, workable agreements instead of having to battle their differences out in costly, time-consuming court proceedings.

The mediation process negotiates sensitive subjects like child custody support and the division of property with a goal to create a fair agreement. Once a couple has come to an agreement, Le Blanc is responsible for composing a memorandum of understanding, which eventually becomes the separation agreement so a separation or divorce process moves along smoothly.

As a fresh addition to the mediation services profession, Le Blanc was shocked when she received an invitation to an exclusive gathering called the Home Court Advantage Summit. With more than 120 judges, lawyers, mediators, mental health professionals and members of the public in attendance, the summit evolved from an in-depth position paper full of recommendations for fixing the previously confusing, slow and expensive separation and divorce process.

It was written by the Ontario Bar Association, Alternative Dispute Resolution Institute of Ontario and the Ontario

Association for Family Mediation and submitted to the Attorney General of Ontario in the early spring of 2009.

The summit offers a final set of recommendations to improve the family law process in Ontario by providing early information, directing parties to the appropriate alternative dispute resolution avenues, providing better access to legal information and developing a streamlined and focused court process. Implementation of some of the changes began on March 1, which left LeBlanc at ease knowing Ontarians could have alternative options to nasty court battles.

"I couldn't believe this was the way the family court system was dealing with things. Mediation was the answer to how couples should separate," said Le Blanc. "Being able to be a part of Canadian family law history was so rewarding."

Initially, Le Blanc was a self-taught moderator for friends and family dealing with separation issues, drawing on the knowledge gained from her own painful struggles and years of devastating court proceedings. She quickly realized she had all the tools and personal experience to become a family mediator and after extensive research, found a growing need for mediators in Ontario's family law system.

Within three months of graduating from Durham College, she enrolled in the Conflict Management and Mediation advanced certificate program at Conrad Grebel University College, University of Waterloo, where she was taught by one of the best of the field, Dr. Barbara Landau, a psychologist, lawyer, accredited family mediator and arbitrator.



PHOTO COURTESY OF KAREN LE BLANC

Once she graduated, Le Blanc wasted no time opening up her own mediation services practice in her hometown of Port Perry, Ont.

"The interview skills taught in the Journalism program were so beneficial to me – to be able to sit down and articulate clearly what other people's feelings are in writing," said Le Blanc. "Having an exceptional amount of writing and interviewing experience through the Journalism program has made my new career path a straightforward transition."

With a new perspective on the family mediation profession, Le Blanc hopes to expand her services in the future so her unhappy past can be used as a learning tool for other Canadians struggling with family court disputes.

## DURHAM COLLEGE MEDIATION – ALTERNATIVE DISPUTE RESOLUTION (GRADUATE CERTIFICATE) PROGRAM

The one-year Mediation – Alternative Dispute Resolution graduate certificate program is designed for individuals with previous education or work experience who are looking to gain the skills and knowledge required to deal effectively with conflict in various settings including:

- Advocacy;
- Community;
- Education;
- Healthcare;
- Human resources; and
- Justice.

The program also offers an in-house practicum that enables students to participate in the operation of campus mediation services as well as an outside practicum with a relevant organization.