

By Tamadhur Al-Aqeel

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The International Academy of Mediators, many of whose members were trained at Pepperdine University's Straus Institute, is teaming with the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School and the Harvard Negotiation Research Project to co-sponsor "Dialogue at Harvard: Master Thinkers Meet Master Practitioners."

Twenty-seven top mediators from California will participate in the conference being held April 27-29.

People from the Harvard project attended the last two conferences, held in Dana Point and Cancun, Mexico. The fact that this year's conference is at Harvard is significant, said Jeffrey Krivis, past president and one of the founders of the organization, who is a mediator based in Los Angeles.

"It's kind of as a thank-you to us to express their gratitude to our program," Krivis said, "and as a way of launching our long-term relationship on studying negotiation."

Krivis will be leading one of the workshops at the three-day conference. Along with the editor of the Harvard Negotiation Journal, Michael A. Wheeler, Krivis will demonstrate some of the advanced techniques of negotiation, such as acting and improvisation.

"What we're going to demonstrate is how conventional negotiation is fine but limiting," Krivis said. He said mediators need to think like jazz musicians. Improvisational jazz musicians go into a session with certain riffs and rhythms and beats that they have practiced for years. They can draw on those techniques to play off of what the other members of the group are doing and make great music. Good negotiators need this kind of ability and flexibility.

"That allows them to think broadly about shifting from the position that they're in, to a position to settle the case," Krivis said.

Participants hope to make beautiful music together for a long time to come.

"This [conference] is a spark that is going to develop into a lot of research and writing about mediation that is going to be really good for the profession," Krivis said.

The mediators' organization and the Harvard Insight Institute will send students into negotiations to write about what really happens in mediations, so that the members begin to have a documented history to draw upon and learn from.

"We're like 10 laps ahead of 'what is mediation,'" Krivis said. "We're demonstrating not just the science of mediation but the art of what we do."

The mission of the 120-strong mediators' organization is to define the standards and qualifications of the profession and to encourage friendly associations between members and other organizations interested in mediation. Membership is by invitation only and is extended to full-time mediators who have attained recognition in the community, mediated more than 1,000 cases and settle 99 percent of cases brought before them.