



## Spotlight- Carolyn Bryson

For Carolyn Bryson, a need to help others led her to a mid-life change and a welcome detour down the road to ADR. “Since July 2001, I have been Founder and President of [ACCORD Mediation Services](#), a full-time mediation and arbitration practice with locations in Rochester, Canandaigua and the Adirondacks. ACCORD Mediation Services is a full-service private practice with a small team of mediators and arbitrators as independent contractors.”

However, Bryson doesn’t just sit on the sidelines or do the normal executive thing; she gets down in the trenches. “While I mediate the majority of our cases, my husband, Gordon, manages all aspects of the company’s operations and case management functions.” And she’s not content with just one company.

“In addition to ACCORD, I am also Founder and President of a second company, [ADDENDA Solutions](#), a full-time small business consulting firm that writes business plans. We also coach entrepreneurs and professionals in all areas of running a successful business or practice.”

Bryson did not start her career in ADR. In fact, she started pretty far from it. “The first 20 years of my career was in the area of banking and finance where I held several mid-high level management positions. Although I was quite successful from a financial perspective, I did not feel personally satisfied. I was at a point in my life where I wanted to engage in more meaningful work by helping others in a more significant way. Coupled with my own personal life circumstances of growing up in a high-level conflict family and personal experiences in approaching problem-solving, I knew deep-down that perhaps my role in life is to help others in the area of conflict resolution. So, at the age of 33, I decided to end my banking career, sell my home, put my furniture into storage and go back to school full-time.”

But, true to form, she decided to help others in her own unique way. “I considered pursuing a law degree at Buffalo Law School versus pursuing a Masters in social work degree at Roberts Wesleyan College. However, these options were two opposing philosophical approaches to conflict resolution. I felt that the approach of self-determination and the empowerment of individuals were more compatible with my own personal value system and ideological principles. So I finished my Bachelors degree in Psychology and Human Development, with intentions to go on to graduate school in pursuit of a Masters in Social Work. However, being married, having family obligations, owning two companies, being on the NYSDRA board of directors, while sitting on several committees, and literally working around the clock, I have yet to begin the pursuit of a graduate degree,” Bryson said with the hint of a smile.

“While finishing my psych degree, I worked at the New York State Attorney General’s Office as a mediator in the Consumer Frauds Department. I absolutely loved it! A colleague who was a former board member at the Center for Dispute Settlement of Rochester told me about the Principles of Mediation Training. This was my gateway to entering the field of ADR.”

From that training, Bryson has not looked back. “From a professional perspective, I have worked in ADR since 1993 and the past 9 years in private practice. However, from a personal perspective, I have intimately studied conflict management principles and practiced conflict management skills since the age of 5. I am now 49!”

As with most ADR pros, Bryson has areas she particularly likes. “I especially enjoy mediating small business and family business matters, as well as contractual disputes between business partners. A significant part of my personal practice, however, is mediating family matters such as reconciliation, separation, child parenting,

and postnuptial concerns. The area of postnuptial matters is rapidly growing in my practice. For example, when troubled relationships are the result of behaviors of addiction and/or substance abuse, postnuptial mediation allows couples to memorialize their mutual expectation of behavior modification, accountability, built-in consequences and safety nets.”

Bryson feels that two specific practices have brought her to this point in her career. First, “truly putting the clients’ needs before my own in every aspect of their experience with our firm.... from speaking with a real live person during their initial phone contact with us, to scheduling evening appointments so they don’t have to use up their personal days from work, to concluding their mediation process by working with an ACCORD-referred attorney who is personable, accommodates fast turn-around-time, and offers post-mediation clients extremely reasonable fees for uncontested matters.”

Her other benchmark is very illustrative of her work style. “I’m a workaholic, which means that I work every day. During the week, my typical workday can be anywhere from 10-16 hours, with no significant timeouts for lunch and/or personal enjoyments. My husband, Gordon, works just as hard as I do. Since our work ethics are very similar, we endeavor to accommodate our clients’ needs and timelines as best as we are humanly able.”

We know how she got here, but along the way, the subject of who helped her is one she has a lot to say about. “It has been the dedication of specific ADR professionals I have had the honor of knowing who have had the greatest influence on my personal and professional development. The quality that sets these particular mentors apart from all others is their genuine devotion to ADR by actually practicing ADR principles in everything they do, every day, in every situation they encounter personally and professionally,” she noted.

“In particular, a few key people provided encouragement and mentoring, beginning with a friend and colleague, Vincent Barone, who was a former assistant attorney general for New York State, and is now an attorney in private practice. He was the first person I called to inquire about entering the field of ADR. He gave me insight about coursework, internships and apprenticeship opportunities that would be keys to acquiring knowledge, experience and skill sets.

“Once I was introduced to the [Center for Dispute Settlement](#) in Rochester, Tony Scott, the trainer there, taught me that helping others in conflict first begins with knowing and understanding oneself. Making sure that one is emotionally and psychologically well grounded, willing to let go of one’s ego, and developing a commitment of empowering others to realize their own outcomes are examples of what I learned from Tony. Others at CDS who reinforced these qualities include Ann Okras, Fred Chase, Donna Durbin, Peggy Richardson, Andrew Thomas and the late Colleen Kingdom-Ackerman.”

Bryson noted that colleagues working in the field were a huge help to her. “In terms of influential mediators I have observed and/or co-mediated with, the individual who exemplifies mastery of the mediation process and effectiveness is Stephen LaLonde. As the director/instructor of Cornell’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations ADR Studies at the time, I was one of his students and apprentice. I learned from Steve that while situations vary from case-to-case, strict adherence to the mediation process is the stabilizing factor. I also learned about the significance of certain competencies that all mediators, regardless of their areas of practice, should master, including writing an Arbitration Award or Memorandum of Understanding. The incorrect use of only one or two words by the mediator can undermine an otherwise successful mediation for the parties. Additional mentors who have had significant influence on my practice include Dr. Bernadette Poole-Tracy, Dr. Carol Horn and the late Judy White.”

For an admitted workaholic, the question of what to do next is always an interesting one. Bryson has definite plans for the future. “The next stage of my career is to write books about ADR practices, have some articles published, and begin implementing ADDENDA Solutions’ Mediator Internship Training Curriculum for professional mediators that has already been co-created with my colleague Dr. Bernadette Poole Tracy. In addition, I plan to develop a comprehensive internship program for arbitrators.”

Over the course of her career, Bryson has seen some very positive change. “I see NYSDRA’s commitment to implementing the NYSDRA Certified Mediator program for career mediators as a significant advancement of the field. In my view, this is a turning point in ADR for New York, and perhaps nationally.” She has been involved in NYSDRA for some time and sees this as very positive. “Clients frequently express a level of comfort and ease when they learn of my credentials, as well as active participation in ADR state and national membership organizations.”

So now, almost 44 years after starting her career in ADR (depending on how you look at it!) what keeps her going? “I see the positive difference in clients once they conclude the mediation process, compared to when they first began. To me, this transformation is among the most gratifying to witness!”

Her lifelong commitment to ADR and its core principles has kept Bryson engaged in the dynamic, and sometimes challenging, evolution of the field. “In my life experience, too many times I have seen groups of people talk about great ideas, wonderful programs, or very important initiatives *ad nauseum*, to the point that the group becomes paralyzed and nothing ever comes of it. I have found that sometimes it is a matter of one or two people finding the courage to take a cautious, calculating step and just do it!” she commented. For Bryson, this quote from Frances Hodgson Burnett (author of *The Secret Garden*) is her guiding idea: “*At first people refuse to believe that a strange new thing can be done, then they begin to hope it can be done, then they see it can be done-then it is done and all the world wonders why it was not done centuries ago.*”