

NEWS FROM OUR HOUSE

SPRING 2019

The Children's **LAW** Center of Connecticut • Protecting Children & Strengthening Families



The Children's
LAW
Center

30 ARBOR STREET
HARTFORD, CT 06106

P: (860) 232-9993
<http://www.clcct.org>

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Meet a Mediator: Charles Higgins

Walking into a courthouse can be intense for parents: their boxing gloves are on and they're determined to fight for their children—often against a person whom they distrust and with whom they're at odds. Mediation presents a stark contrast and often a huge relief to these parents. Instead of a large, imposing building filled with strangers, parents come to CLC's offices to find warm lighting, comfy seats, and caring people who are ready to listen. One of these people is very likely to be Charles "Charlie" Higgins—an attorney with extensive training and experience in mediation, facilitation, and negotiation—who volunteers his time to help parents determine the best solutions for their family through CLC's Families in Transition (FIT) mediation program. As a co-mediator alongside CLC staff social worker, Nicole "Nikki" Silva, Charlie builds rapport and trust, and teaches parents vital skills to improve their co-parenting relationship.



Mediation partners *Charlie Higgins* and *Nikki Silva*

Charlie's goal in FIT is to use his experience to "give back to the community and help people to negotiate solutions to their issues that would improve their lives and the lives of their children." And his experience certainly is valuable! A graduate of UConn and Boston University Law School, Charlie worked for a private practice law firm before joining Cigna Corporation. One of his primary duties in both positions involved negotiations in a variety of contexts, including contracts and agreements, litigation settlements and other matters. Charlie received a mediation certificate in 2006 and a facilitation certificate in 2009. He served as a volunteer mediator for Community Mediation in Wallingford (2009-2014) before meeting a former CLC staff attorney, who introduced him to CLC's FIT program in 2011.

"I once had a priest that said that our children are our hearts beating outside our chests," Charlie related, when discussing why he was moved to support FIT. "I think most parents feel that way, but don't necessarily know how to negotiate the best solutions with their co-parent." His compassion stems from a dedication to improving the lives of children: "It is very satisfying when the parties come to any agreement, even if it is not on all of the issues that affect their relationship or their children, because it provides relief to the parties and I believe that the lives of their children are improved."

Nikki remembers when she and Charlie co-mediated for one couple. Although mom initially had primary custody, her struggle with addiction created instability for the child. Eventually, both parents agreed to a change in custody that was in their child's best interest. When asked how successful mediation can bring about agreements that are difficult for parents to accept, Nikki emphasized that trust and communication are key. "Charlie is a calm, open presence and a great listener. He builds rapport quickly by helping parents feel heard. He believes in the process, cares about people and their lives, and really considers how mediation affects the kids."

"I have not met a parent yet that did not love their children and believe they were acting for their children's benefit," said Charlie, "but parents often need help in sorting out their children's interests from their own. . . . When parents come to agreements and gain some knowledge about their children from the social worker co-mediator they can feel better about how they are interacting with both the other parent and with their children. Issues get resolved and the parents can focus on more positive things."

CLC is grateful to benefit from Charlie's valuable skills, experience and support. He and CLC's other FIT mediator volunteers are vital to the program's success in protecting children and strengthening families. For more information about FIT, visit our website at: <http://www.clcct.org/our-services/mediation/>

Children Win When Both Parents are Involved

Children thrive when they have a relationship with both parents in homes with low conflict. They are more likely to succeed academically, enjoy balanced interpersonal relationships, and face fewer mental health and behavioral issues as adults. These benefits foster adults who can more fully engage with their community and have fewer barriers to success. Equipped with this knowledge, CLC's attorneys and social worker put the child's needs at the center of each case.



Davon was the miracle child of Andre and Brandy, who were never married but were committed to having a child together. After the tragic loss of a child in delivery two years prior, the new parents were ecstatic for their second child and each was committed to raising him.

Brandy, who had previously been incarcerated, violated her parole and returned to prison shortly after Davon's birth. Released from prison to a halfway house when Davon was two years old, she was unable to have the strong relationship with her son that she craved. This was a wake-up call for Brandy, who filed for visits with Davon and committed to turn her life around. Within two years, she had found stable employment, a suitable home, married a new partner, and welcomed a daughter into her family. Andre, however, was unsure about the kind of influence Brandy would have on Davon.

Davon, then 4, had grown up largely without his mother. He cried during supervised visits with her, and Andre was anxious about the possibility of unsupervised visitation and overnights. Andre and Brandy's differing opinions created conflict so severe that they could not tolerate being in the same room together. They had been in and out of court for years, with escalating conflict and deepening distrust, when the court ordered reunification counseling. Andre remained unswayed by the counselor's conclusion that there was no reason that the mother and son couldn't see each other. When Andre began to refuse Brandy access to their son, CLC was appointed by the court to represent Davon's best interests.

Although Brandy's deep love for her son was apparent, CLC's team—an attorney and social worker—concluded that a slow increase in visitation was called for, expanding Brandy's time with Davon over the course of a year. It was also obvious that the high level of conflict within the parents' relationship was untenable. The CLC team began to educate Andre and Brandy on effective co-parenting. Without more constructive communication between the two, their parenting would not be effective. Each parent had to know what issues Davon encountered, what needs he had, what needs had been met, and how to set consistent boundaries for him. The CLC team worked with Andre and Brandy to reduce negative talk and establish a rapport.

Meanwhile, CLC's team created a plan. The social worker gave each parent a calendar to help organize their visits and communicate important dates, appointments, and other reminders. In addition, CLC's offices became Davon's transition point between parents. The CLC team could see clearly, firsthand, how parental conflict and isolation affected Davon. Each time a transition happened, he cried inconsolably. As parental conflict decreased, however, so did Davon's extreme emotional response. Eventually, after entering kindergarten, Davon's school became the main transition point, and it worked wonderfully. One parent would drop him off, and the other would pick him up with no drama.

Andre responded well to the social worker, feeling comfortable to discuss his anxiety and eventually responding to her recommendations. With an agreed-upon visitation and transition plan in place—which included overnight parenting time and weekends—the case went into maintenance mode.

CLC's social worker continues to provide assistance as needed; for example, she contacts Davon's school regarding issues that arise, and assists in making transitions easier when the normal transition plan is unavailable due to school breaks. The last court order issued was in June 2018, and since then, this case has remained out of court—due in no small part to the improved communication skills developed by each parent with CLC's help. And, rather than tears, Davon greets his parents with a smile now, benefiting from the loving relationship which parents and children should have.

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Save the Date
2019 Annual Gala
November 21 | Delamar West Hartford

Funder Spotlight: Main Street Community Foundation

CLC is thrilled to be an award recipient of a \$2,250 grant from Main Street Community Foundation's Women and Girls' Fund!

In 2018, CLC represented the best interests of 263 girls living in CT by providing high quality legal representation with the goal of reducing parental conflict and creating safe, stable environments that allow these children to thrive. We are proud to protect the interests of girls in the MSCF community and greatly appreciate this award, which helps make our program possible.

Welcome Margaret Bozek

CLC is thrilled to announce that Margaret Bozek has joined the CLC team as Staff Attorney and Program Liaison.

A graduate of Albertus Magnus College and UConn School of Law, Margaret has experience in all aspects of family law, including litigation, collaborative divorce, mediation, and the representation of children.



Margaret volunteers as a Special Master for Hartford Superior Court, New Britain Superior Court and Regional High Conflict Custody Court. She is a trained parenting coordinator and has volunteered as a mediator in CLC's Families in Transition program. She is a member of the CCND, CCFLG, IACP, the Connecticut Bar Association and is a former co-chair of the Family Law Section of the Hartford County Bar Association.

Please help us to welcome Margaret to the CLC family!

Greetings and Goodbyes at CLC: Our Board of Directors

In 2018, CLC celebrated the addition of two new members to our Board of Directors, welcomed back a returning member, and said a fond farewell to long-time board members.

Mark Boxer (serving 6 years), Sandra Gersten (serving 12 years), Bob Madden (serving 23 years), and Gaurav Patel (serving 2 years) supported CLC with dedication. While we will miss them, they will always be a part of the CLC family.

Please help us welcome our newest board members, Melissa Arkus and Cara Hardacker!



Melissa Arkus is the Human Resources Officer for Cigna's Finance, Marketing, Legal and Clinical organizations. She has worked for Cigna for 19 years in various HR leadership roles across the company. In her current role, Melissa is accountable for leading the development and execution of an effective people strategy across these enterprise functions to advance growth priorities. In her previous role, Melissa served as the HR leader for the Global Marketing, Service Operations and Real Estate organization. Under her leadership, the Operations Leadership Development program launched a refreshed framework to attract high caliber early career talent; and create an experiential path to prepare Associates for broad leadership roles. Melissa holds a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Legal Studies from Bucknell University and a Juris Doctor from University of Connecticut School of Law. She was admitted to the Connecticut State Bar in 2004. Melissa lives in West Hartford, CT with her husband and two young daughters.



Cara Hardacker is an Assistant Vice President of Underwriting for AXA XL's professional lines group. She specializes in Directors and Officers Insurance, working with executives of large commercial and financial institutions on their risk management practices and protection. Prior to joining AXA in 2015, Cara lived in Boston for 6 years, working as a Senior Underwriter at Catlin Inc. During her time in Boston she volunteered with a number of charities, spending most of her time helping to run the Young Professionals Group for the Women's Lunch Place, a day shelter for women and children in Boston's Back Bay neighborhood. Cara first learned of CLC when she attended the Gala in 2015. After hearing about CLC's mission she joined the Gala committee for the following year and has enjoyed working with such a wonderful and committed organization ever since. Cara lives in West Hartford with her husband.

We are also thrilled to welcome Patrick Proctor back to our board. Patrick previously served on our board for 14 years.

Board of Directors:

Tim Buckley, President
Laura Post, Vice President
Jonathan Fink, Treasurer
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Dan A. Brody
Scott Esposito
Cara Hardacker
Patricia Pheanious
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Nicole Silva
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Tonia Tubaya
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More Ways to Support CLC

Amazon Smile: Simply select CLC as your nonprofit of choice and shop www.smile.amazon.com.

Birdies for Charity: Keep an eye out for information on this opportunity to make your donation grow!

Matching Gifts: Many employers encourage giving by offering matching gift options. Ask your employer about this easy way to grow your donation.

Bequests: Be a hero to CT children—consider a legacy gift. For information, contact Deb at deb@clcct.org.



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Join Us at Our Upcoming Events

...and keep an eye out for Traveler's Championship's Birdies for Charity, a chance to make your donation grow!



**Hog River Brewing Co.
Fundraiser**

April 28, 6-8 PM
Hog River Brewing Co.
1429 Park St.
Hartford, CT 06106



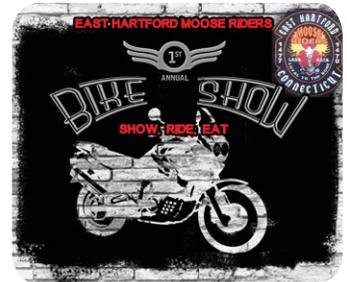
**Wine, Women & Fashion
BK & Co. Fundraiser**

May 1, 6-8 pm
BK & Co.
983 Farmington Ave.
West Hartford, CT



**Connecticut Street Legends
Car Show for CLC**

May 4, 10-2 pm
Keeney Manufacturing Field
Lowrey Place off Main Street
Newington, CT



**East Hartford Moose
Riders Bike Show & Ride**

September 29, 10:30-6 pm
East Hartford Moose Lodge
404 Prospect St.
East Hartford, CT