

A Memorial Recollection of Christine Merchant

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(Written in response to a request from the Association of Conflict Resolution magazine in remembrance of Christine Merchant)

By Jerry Barrett

Christine Merchant was a member of class of FMCS interns for which I was primary responsibility in the mid 1970s. I recruited and selected candidates, developed and conducted the training of eight to ten interns in two classes. Following the training, I worked to introduce them successfully to the field to begin their careers. During the interns six months in Washington, I interacted with them daily.

All of the interns were young. Christine was the youngest.

During the six months, Christine lived in D.C. with her cat. Almost every day as the class assembled, Christine would share a cat story with the group. Many stories involved her trying to get the cat, (I forgot its name) into the bathroom and close the door before she left for the office. She tried to get ready for the office without the cat knowing, because if she didn't, the cat would hide, and Christine would need to hunt for her and struggle to get her into the bathroom. All of us enjoyed her cat stories.

Once the interns were transferred to a field station, I needed to assure their acceptance by their boss, and other mediators. The acceptance and resistance varied among the Regions. With some interns, I stayed in phone contact for a month or two. For others, it was longer. Shortly after Christine was assigned to Philadelphia, and before she was assigned cases of her own, she phoned me at home very excited to share a great story.

All the mediators were involved in a case out of the office, when the Regional Director got a call from a company reporting that a wild-cat strike was scheduled for 1PM by the Long Shoremen's Union. The Regional Director knew that the strike would shut down the entire Philadelphia port, so he reluctantly called Christine into his office and explained the urgency. He told her to go to a specific pier where she would find the union committee in a warming house. He directed Christine to introduce herself and keep them talking until he could get an experienced mediator to handle the case.

Here is what Christine reported to me on the phone with her typical upbeat enthusiasm:

She found the pier and warming house, knocked on the door and entered to find ten 50 year old plus men with shocked faces as she introduced herself as the Federal mediator. A young, blond woman was not what they were expecting.

So she told them two stories about her cat, and they fell in love as if she was their grand daughter. And the rest was easy. Within two hours, she had a settlement. She provided no more details of what she did. She just reminded me that I had told the interns for six months to be yourself and work with what you have, and she had her cat.

I am the unofficial historian of FMCS and the Founder of the USCS/FMCS History Foundation. I have conducted almost 200 oral history interviews of mediators and retired mediators, including Christine. I recorded her interview in 1985.