

Peter Adler: Conflict mediator's high-profile projects keep him busy
By Mark Coleman
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“The work that I really focus on is the public policy controversies, and I get called in when people are trying to either unstick a problem or need to do some strategy work to get in alignment,” said Peter S. Adler, founder and principal of The ACCORD3.0 Network.

Peter S. Adler likes to say he's lived much of his life in the eye of the storm.

In fact, in 2008 he wrote a book based on that concept, “Eye of the Storm Leadership,” which discusses some of what he had learned as a professional mediator up to that point.

In Hawaii, Adler has put his conflict assessment and resolution skills to use in a variety of settings, including as principal of The ACCORD3.0 Network, which he founded in 2012 and whose team of experts are often called upon for assistance by government and private entities in Hawaii and elsewhere.

Contentious issues Adler has worked on in Hawaii recently include the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT), the Native Hawaiian sovereignty convention (the ‘aha) and the effects of pesticides use on Kauai. Before starting the network, Adler was president and chief executive for nine years of The Keystone Center in Colorado, which also specialized in mediation services. From 2000 to 2004 he was a partner in The Accord Group. He also was executive director of the Hawaii Justice Foundation, from 1992 to 2001; director of the state Supreme Court's Center for Alternative Dispute Resolution, from 1985 to 1992; and executive director, from 1979 to 1985, of the Neighborhood Justice Center of Honolulu, one of Hawaii's first community mediation programs.

Originally from Chicago, where one of his buddies was the son of community organizer, writer and family friend Saul Alinsky, Adler has a bachelor's degree in English and history from Roosevelt University in Chicago, a master's degree in community development from the University of Missouri in Columbia, and a doctorate in sociology from the Union Institute and University in Cincinnati. Adler, 71, is married to the former Carolyn Watanabe, a Hawaii native whom he met in India while they were both Peace Corps volunteers. They spent a cold winter in Boston first before deciding they were “tropical people” and would prefer to live in Hawaii. Together they have three adult daughters and four grandchildren, and live in Manoa.

Question: How does your company land these jobs to investigate issues like the TMT proposal, or conduct the ‘aha or review the use of pesticides on Kauai?

Answer: Well, The ACCORD3.0 Network is actually a network and not a formal business, but I've been doing this kind of work for more than 25 years, so I suspect it's primarily people know me from some other context and they will approach me and we'll talk about a project, whether it's the Na'i Aupuni or whether it's GMO work, and we'll have some exploratory discussions.

Q: Are they mostly government kinds of programs that you work on?

A: First, my specialty as a facilitator and as a mediator is on public policy and large-scale community matters. Mediators do many different things — some work on divorces and some work on commercial problems — but the work that I really focus on is the public policy controversies, and I get called in when people are trying to either unstick a problem or need to do some strategy work to get in alignment.

Q: In terms of unsticking a policy issue, how do you assure clients, and the public when it matters, that you guys don't have a dog in the hunt?

A: I go to great lengths to declare any potential conflicts of interest, and I also have no objection if, after talking with me, people say, "Well, no, you're not the right person." Then I'll try to help them find the right person, because I'm part of a network.

Q: Who are some of the other principals in The ACCORD3.0? Are some of them, like yourself, former Peace Corps people?

A: They are. It's about 25 people, and you can see them all at the website. Many of them are in Hawaii; there's a few in Australia, Singapore, elsewhere. So we're sort of spread out, and all of us are working on public policy problems here, in Asia, in Europe, just all over the place.

Q: On the TMT issue, apparently you advised them years ago, after extensive research at their request, that the proposed project atop Mauna Kea would face so many hurdles, including all the ones they eventually went on to face, yet they went ahead anyway. Did that surprise you?

A: Well, no. You know, at the time they spent seven years working on the contested-case hearings and getting their permits and doing EISs (environmental impact statements), and we had done a pretty good job. This was when I was at the Keystone Center in Colorado.

In my capacity as CEO of that, I was approached by the Gordon Moore Foundation. They're a science-oriented group, and Gordon Moore himself lives on the Big Island, and his family is very interested in making grants to science enterprises.

And they came and said, "Look, could you help us do some of the political and cultural diligence that we think is needed to site this in Hawaii?"

At the time, I was really spending most of my time in D.C. and in Colorado, but I know Hawaii quite well — I'm from here, at least for the last 250 years anyway (laughter) — so we did this project. We did lots of interviews, and had a lot of discussions with some 60 people on all sides of the issue back in 2007.

What we didn't anticipate, I think, was the genesis of a new, very social-media savvy generation of young Hawaiians. We just wouldn't have seen that. But we had identified a lot of the issues they would face. We had given them some advice on how to collaborate and work with those things. They followed lots of it. But I think nobody expected recent developments that have occurred.

Q: Did you advise them, by any chance, that if they were to go ahead, they should bird-dog the process to make sure none of the state agencies involved cut corners or violated procedure at any point, which is what tripped them up in the end, right?

A: Well, they actually had their own legal counsel. So they didn't need to hear that from me. They

knew that themselves. And again, my role was to really try to help do some of the management, anticipate some of the conflicts and try to set some strategies in place.

Q: If they do decide to stick around, rather than look for a new mountain peak somewhere else in the world, like they're doing right now, do you think it would be wise for them to continue here?

A: Well, at least as I understand it — I'm not working on any pieces of it right now — they're taking stock of whether they can do their project here and get it done in a timely way. I have no inside understanding of the decision-making and how it will go, but I saw in the paper today that they're looking at India, Chile, Mexico ...

Q: They don't seem to be bluffing.

A: It's a tough, tough problem.

Q: About the Kauai issue, was your conclusion essentially that there's not enough evidence to warrant a ban or stricter regulations on pesticides use, other than what the state already has?

A: There's a draft report out, and we're still taking a lot of public comments at the moment, but what the draft report says — and it's out there at our website and very available — is that based on the data that we've looked at, both the health data and the pesticides-use data, we cannot prove or disprove a harm. We just can't see it.

This case was actually initiated by the director of the state Department of Agriculture, Scott Enright, and then it was co-funded by Kauai Mayor Bernard Carvalho. As you know, GMO and pesticide use has been a hot issue.

In this case, what we are doing is we are really focused on trying to get factual information, so that it's less about, "I say this and you say this," and much more about joint, mediated inquiry into the facts. What do we know about health; what do we know about pesticide use; what do we know about environmental impacts, if anything? We have a very cross-pollinated working group and they've been at it for a year, and we have basically come out and said, "Here are the areas that really need some analysis and study by the state more systematically, by the Department of Health and the Department of Agriculture."

Q: How do you justify researching a complex scientific issue like this? Do you have people who are credentialed in that regard?

A: Yes. Just to give you some examples, we had two doctors, in our group; we have several agricultural economists; we have a guy who is an entomologist; we had a biologist; we had a land-use planner. So we put together a working group that really was cross-disciplinary.

Basically this has been a long-term effort by 12 what-I-consider-to-be brave people on Kauai, because they're in the eye of the storm.

Q: Where is this issue going from here?

A: We've had some early indications that the state is really interested in some of the studies we've proposed. We're a little late for this Legislature, but I think the governor is paying attention to this. Certainly the Kauai legislators are very focused and attentive to this, as are others, because this is really a much larger issue than just Hawaii.

Q: What about the ‘aha, the convention of Native Hawaiians, that your network was hired to conduct for Na‘i Aupuni? How did that come about and how did it go?

A: Well, I was approached by Na‘i Aupuni, by their attorney, and by their directors, and asked would I serve as a facilitator for what was then their upcoming process. And I was very reluctant to do that myself. I said, “Look, I’m not Hawaiian. You really need Hawaiians doing this.” And they said, “Please assemble a team.” And that’s what I did.

So we had a team of facilitators, a terrific group. And our goal was to get the ‘aha participants to take on the responsibilities of doing this themselves. So we were there really largely for the first two weeks helping them get organized, getting rules in place, getting an elected group of officers, and then staying connected to it for the other two weeks to help and advise and counsel and provide whatever support we could.

And I was very honored. I think all of us are very honored to be a part of something that was clearly historic.

Q: You don’t think it was a futile exercise ultimately?

A: No, not all. There’s a long way to go still, and our involvement is finished at the moment. We were brought in just for that, to do our conflict-management work. ... But I don’t think anybody actually thought they were going to achieve what they did, which was create a draft constitution and a declaration.

Q: You didn’t have that raucous situation that a lot of people imagine when all these various activists get together and try to talk about these things?

A: No — I mean, there’s lots of disagreements in the Hawaiian community, just like there are in every other community here. It doesn’t matter if it’s all the haoles or all the Japanese or all the Koreans. We all find our squabbles. But the Hawaiians actually came together and they worked very, very hard and with a great deal of grace at the end. I mean, there were fights and disagreements, but I was very proud to see them come together.

Q: What kinds of issues do you personally find most interesting?

A: One of the most interesting projects of the last few years was I did a lot of extended work in Papua New Guinea. I was working at what’s called the Ok Tedi Mine. At the time it was one of the world’s most severe environmental disasters. The whole river system had been contaminated, and these were compensation negotiations with the equivalent of 60,000 indigenous people up and down the river. So I was back and forth to there for several years.

I’ve also been involved recently in running some meetings overseas on the ozone treaty — you know, the donut hole up there? It’s the U.N.’s Montreal Protocol and they’re going through some revisions, so I’ve been involved in some of those.

I like working here in Hawaii. This is my home. But I also enjoy some of these complex projects that carry me elsewhere.