



Dr Tom Condon, a Brookfield family and child psychologist, and attorney Katherine Webster-O'Keefe of New Milford offer co-mediation services to couples divorcing, with an emphasis on financial and mental health, respect, and dignity in a nonconfrontational environment. Turning what can be a painful and destructive process into one of understanding and mutual agreement through improved communication and access to legal knowledge is the goal for the experienced lawyer and psychologist, who formed Candlewood Co-Mediation Center, LLC in the spring of 2008.
—Bee Photo, Crevier

Candlewood Co-Mediation Center Offers Alternative To Divorce Process

BY NANCY K. CREVIER

Attorney Katherine Webster-O'Keefe of New Milford and psychologist Thomas Condon of Brookfield have joined together to bring Connecticut residents an alternative to the traditional, court-ruled divorce process that can lead to months or even years of frustration, anger, and costly litigation. Co-mediation at Candlewood Mediation Center, LLC, lat 60 Old New Milford Road in Brookfield, is a new approach to move couples through divorce with dignity and respect for each other and any children involved, while taking advantage of the legal and mental health expertise offered by the duo.

A lawyer since 1983 with a great deal of experience in divorce and the family and financial issues that accompany divorce proceedings, Ms Webster-O'Keefe no longer practices divorce litigation, preferring the less adversarial and less costly approach of co-mediation or other alternatives to work out an equitable agreement for a couple.

Dr Condon's experience as a family, marriage, and child psychologist goes back over 30 years. He has seen families devastated by bitter, conflicted divorces that leave children caught up in the emotional crossfire. He is passionate about helping couples reduce the damage that can be inflicted during a divorce.

Like Ms Webster-O'Keefe, Dr Condon felt that for couples who want to retain control of the divorce process, make the decisions, and minimize damage to the individuals or family unit, there

had to be a better way than the traditional legal process.

The collaborative divorce model, with which both have been involved for several years, addresses the issues of divorce by providing a team of life coaches, mental health professionals, financial experts, and a lawyer to represent each party. The team and the divorcing couple meet together to come to a mutual agreement out of court. It is a good alternative that delivers a higher quality product than traditional litigation for many, said Dr Condon and Ms Webster-O'Keefe, but for some people the atmosphere can be overwhelming for someone going through a divorce.

Solo mediation, with just a lawyer or just a counselor, is another option. However, said Dr Condon, there is the loss in one direction or the other of the richness of legal expertise or of managing difficult emotions. Dr Condon and Ms Webster-O'Keefe believe that co-mediation improves on solo mediation and collaborative divorce models by streamlining the process, and allowing the couple the advantage of legal and mental health assistance. They also feel that having a partnership made up of two people of different genders is advantageous. "Knowing that there is someone else in the room of the same sex has a lot of benefit to our clients. There is no sense that we only see a male or female perspective of the situation," Ms Webster-O'Keefe said.

Co-mediation through Candlewood Mediation Center, they said, provides divorcing couples with legal, financial, and emotional support in a safe

and comfortable setting. "Our goal is to make this as non-adversarial as possible," said Dr Condon.

Fewer experts means a lower cost in most cases, as well, said Ms Webster-O'Keefe, with each party needing their own lawyers only to review the binding legal documents defining the agreement that is mediated, before it is presented in court. However, at any point along the way in co-mediation if a party wants to talk to a personal attorney, the team encourages the person to do so. "What I do not do in any mediation is represent any party, so it is definitely advised that each person show the agreement to his or her own lawyer before signing. When people enter into an agreement, it is important that they know their options and the law. I want to make sure that they have an agreement that the judge is going to accept, that they can live with the agreement, and that it meets their needs," she said.

Coming To Fair Agreements

By managing emotions and showing couples how to communicate effectively, said Dr Condon, it is possible to come to an agreement that is fair to both parties, within the law, and avoid costly litigation in a courtroom. Professional guidance offered by Dr Condon helps turn nonproductive conversations into productive conversations, an important turning point in coming to an agreement. "If we can help people manage emotions, we get optimum results in less time," said Dr Condon.

They do not want to foster the impression that co-mediation is marriage counseling. "It is not

counseling and it is not therapy," emphasized Dr Condon. "It is dealing with the here and now in a productive manner," he said.

"The mediation process," added Ms Webster-O'Keefe, "is a process to get through the divorce, not to reconcile."

Providing a couple with the tools to move forward is the primary focus of co-mediation, said Dr Condon. As a child psychologist, his interest also lies in ensuring that any children involved come out of the transition better off. "Very often and unwittingly, children become the casualties of a divorce," said Dr Condon. "Adults are familiar with what they want, but the interests of the children can be lost. Katherine and I can help children have a voice in the process, even though they are not present at co-mediation sessions. Parents can make decisions without making children choose," he said. A reconstituted family following a co-mediated divorce can actually be better for children, Dr Condon said, than what often results from the emotionally charged and distressful environment surrounding a bitter, legal battle.

"But whether or not the couple has children, we want them to go through the process with dignity, and move on as individuals," stressed Ms Webster-O'Keefe. "Divorce is a major life event."

Appointments can be made through Dr Condon at the Candlewood Mediation Center, 60 Old New Milford Road, Brookfield, 740-9119; or at Ms Webster-O'Keefe's New Milford office, 860-350-5009. For more information visit candlewoodmediation-center.com.