

## “Fox Valley Lawyer: Not All Divorces Have To Be Nasty”

By Burt Constable,

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The most popular month for weddings, June also is the fertile garden for future divorces. When some of the marriages planted in the bliss of June are ready for the compost heap, things can turn ugly. Like a mushroom popping out of a rotten stump, hate can blossom in the remains of love gone sour.

There are prohibitive prison terms for people who attempt to artificially get to that "Till death do us part" of their wedding vows. So, in many cases, the splitting couple embark on a bitter, costly, time-consuming, emotional, soul-crushing divorce that seeks to inflict as much damage as possible on the other party and reduce the old family environment to scorched Earth.

Every Tuesday night this month on Chicago Access Network Television stations, attorney Sandra Crawford of Lake in the Hills tells people, "There is a better way." Crawford is a proponent and practitioner of "collaborative divorce," a process that avoids pitting one side against the other, and promises to keep everyone out of court by using a team of experts in divorce, finances, children and mental health working together to reach a settlement.

"The process has been around for 20 years," says Talia Katz, executive director of the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals ([collaborativepractice.org](http://collaborativepractice.org)), which has networks in almost every state and 24 nations. "It's growing very rapidly. The old family environment to scorched Earth.

As a past president and one of the founding members of the Collaborative Law Institute of Illinois ([collablawil.org](http://collablawil.org)), Crawford says Illinois has been training more and more collaborative professionals, will host the international forum in Chicago in 2012 and is pushing for a Uniform Collaborative Law Act that will ensure all states follow the same guidelines for collaborative cases.

While traditional litigators talk about collaborating in the best interest of both sides in a divorce, Crawford says people who are trained as collaborating professionals enter a binding written agreement not to take the case to court. They withdraw from the case if the couple does want to litigate.

"The philosophy behind collaborative divorce is simple," Crawford says. "Even if your marriage fails, that doesn't mean you have to carry that failure over into your post-marriage lives."

Divorces in many suburban courts may take a couple of years and cost \$50,000 or more to litigate, Crawford says. She says collaborative divorces aren't dependent upon the court schedule and generally are quicker and cost less.

"Sometimes the answer is not more lawyering," she says, noting that the collaborative process includes financial experts, children's advocates and mental health professionals when needed. The co-presidents of the Illinois collaborative law group are Patricia Cunningham, a divorce coach and licensed clinical professional with Quest Clinical Services in Lisle, and Amy Robinson, a clinical psychologist and divorce coach from Barrington who has offices in Park Ridge.

"We're not lawyers. We're mental health people," says Cunningham, who lives in Geneva. "We emphasize the needs of the family as a unit. When you get the mental health people involved it's 'How do we work through it?' instead of just turning it into the Jerry Springer show. I love it because I've seen it work for families. It is a dream to say we can end a marriage and be friends. It is a reality to say we can end a marriage and be friendly."

The collaborative process doesn't pit one party's finances against the other's.

"I believe in it or I wouldn't have started down this path," says Bill Keffer, a collaboratively trained certified divorce financial analyst and certified financial planner from Wheaton. As a neutral party, Keffer says he strips away some of the emotion from issues such as who keeps the family home and directs them toward agreements that will be a "win-win" for both sides.

"It really makes it more of a business negotiation and less of a war," Keffer says, "and that makes business sense."

Most litigated divorce cases in court end up going through the battles before being negotiated by the lawyers and approved by the judge.

"My hour is my hour whether I'm sitting outside waiting for court or I'm sitting with people, helping them," says Crawford. "You want to keep arguing over the purple couch? I make \$300 an hour."