



Photos by John Berry/Times Herald Staff

Jon Ostroff, above, president of Divorce Done Right in Plymouth sits at his desk with Cara who spends a lot of time in the office with him. Below, Winni Backlund, mediator; Ostroff, president; and Paula Dreher, intake coordinator; in the "mediation suite" at the office earlier this month.

## Divorce done right

### Company takes a kinder, gentler approach to the splitting process

By GARY PULEO  
Times Herald Staff

PLYMOUTH — Neil Sedaka once sang that breaking up is hard to do. Maybe he just didn't have the right divorce mediator.

Often regarded as a kinder, gentler approach to resolving a dispute, mediation has become a popular way of reaching a peaceful settlement between both parties in a divorce.

Frequently mandated by a bogged-down court system, it's also a less expensive method than buying endless hours of lawyer time to decide who gets the espresso machine.

Nine of the Philadelphia area's most experienced divorce and custody mediators have joined forces to declare their alliance under the square-shooting name of Divorce Done Right, which is based in Plymouth Meeting.

The trip from the honeymoon suite to the "mediation suite" — as DDR calls its branches, some of which are in Blue Bell, Pottstown and Willow Grove — is never an easy road. But a divorcing couple can navigate their way a lot more easily with the help of a good mediator, noted President and founder Jon Ostroff.

"I've been a personal injury attorney for nearly 20 years now and I've used mediation, arbitration and alternative dispute resolution approaches my whole career," said Ostroff, who does not conduct mediations himself.

Ostroff became convinced of the power of mediation first hand when going through his own divorce a while back.

"From the beginning, I was really anxious to use mediation in my own divorce but it was over two years before my former wife would agree to the process.

"After two and a half years of really intense litigation, once she agreed to do mediation we settled everything within 60 days," he added ruefully. "It was unfortunate for us because many of the people we're helping now start there instead of ending there, and they're avoiding

all of that litigation."

DDR mediators estimate that 80 to 90 percent of all couples who seek their services are resolving their issues by talking it out, Ostroff noted.

While mediation is common in places such as California, it's rarely been used in the Philadelphia area until recently, he said.

"In Chester County you're required to go through mediation in every custody case at the time of filing, so it's getting to be mandatory in a lot of places now," Ostroff explained. "But I don't think there's another organization like ours in the country, with nine experienced mediators."

In 1996 the Supreme Court passed a law allowing local courts to mandate mediation or other alternatives to litigation within their courthouses.

"Based on that law, but Montgomery and Chester counties implemented different forms of mandatory mediation, but at different points," Ostroff said. "The goal is statewide to increase the use of alternatives to litigation."

The most obvious benefit to couples who choose mediation is that it puts them in control of their situation, Ostroff explained.

"When you go to court, you're never in control," he said. "In mediation the couple decides what they want to deal with first — is it custody, is it support, is it division of property?"

While no two people stroll into the office holding hands, many are so deeply in conflict they can't imagine ever emerging from the maelstrom on speaking terms.

"But in every case there is an 'aha' moment," Ostroff allowed. "It might be that one of the two spouses gets emotional and the other one hands her a tissue. Or it might be that one of them says, 'You've never, ever listened to me the whole time we've been married.' Something that subtle happens, and all of a sudden they will turn a corner."

The revelation will often spark a willingness to compromise as the



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tone switches from war-like to conciliatory.

"They realize there can be a dialogue between them," Ostroff said. "So not only do they get through many of their issues and reach agreements, they realize they can do it themselves. We may facilitate that, but they're in charge."

Though technically not a staff member, Ostroff's beloved dog Cara may be the most prominent serenity-booster that DDR can claim as its own.

"When there's a lot of stress and one person comes out and they need to take a break and there's Cara just looking up at him wanting to be petted, it's a real stress reliever," he admitted.

Ostroff won custody of Cara in his divorce settlement and wouldn't think of coming to work without her.

"I rationalize having her here as a stress reliever, but I bring her to the office because she's a great dog and I love her," he said, laughing.