



A TEAM EFFORT

Lake Norman Collaborative Divorce Group offers a healthy way to break up

When their clients became embroiled in a heated he-said, she-said confrontation earlier this month, divorce attorneys Laura Snider Baker and John Friguglietti, Jr. responded quickly to sort out the confusion before an emotional — and costly — meltdown ensued.

Friguglietti, a family law attorney in Davidson who handles real estate, criminal, corporate, traffic and general civil cases, estimates the argument could have cost the couple \$25,000 or more in legal fees, litigation and court time.

Instead of hashing their issues out in front of a judge, the couple addressed their feelings in a boardroom-style meeting with Baker and

Friguglietti. As a result, they avoided months — possibly years — of legal headaches.

Baker and Friguglietti are part of a team of six professionals, including financial specialists, divorce coaches, child specialists and family lawyers, known as the Lake Norman Collaborative Divorce Group. The group offers an innovative — and friendly — approach to severing family ties. The other four members include Landa Duszynski, Shannon Hartman, Debra McKenzie and Ingrid Pruitt.

A NEW WAY

Collaborative divorce is a revolutionary new process that combines the best of legal, emotional and financial wisdom to help couples dissolve their marriage in a civilized and amicable manner without going to court.

Collaborative divorce is an ideal solution for couples that are childless, have minor children or are empty nesters.

“We’ve had clients who will vent for two hours about what their spouse did or said that made them angry,” says Baker. “In a collaborative divorce, clients can spend the same two hours with a coach, learning how to talk and listen better.”

While it sounds like a warm and fuzzy way to split up and start over, the process is sometimes as challenging and expensive as conventional divorce, warn Baker and Friguglietti.

But the payoffs are immense, especially when children are at the center of the proceedings.

A licensed marriage and family therapist for Solutions Counseling in Mooresville and a divorce coach for the Lake Norman group, Pruitt says court proceedings are emotionally taxing on lawyers, clients and especially children. Unlike traditional proceedings, collaborative divorce puts children first by giving spouses access to financial specialists, divorce coaches and other professionals who work as a team to help families redefine how they live.

From left, Laura Snider Baker, John Friguglietti, Jr., Ingrid Pruitt, Debra McKenzie and Landa Duszynski are part of the Lake Norman Collaborative Divorce Group.

"A conventional divorce typically feels more like a battleground where the children are caught in the middle. No one wins when that happens," says Pruitt. "As a group, we strive to keep our cases, especially those with children involved, out of the courtroom. ... We all work together to achieve a mutual goal that puts the children first."

Pruitt believes the team's coaches help divorcing couples understand what their children might not be able to express. "We give the children in our cases a voice."

HELP THROUGH EXPERIENCE

McKenzie started Equitable Divorce Solutions, Inc. in Cornelius 11 years ago to help clients sort out their marital estates and evaluate the tax implications of splitting up. She had just returned from an intense training session in Arizona where the idea to launch the collaborative group hit her.

"I first heard about it in a continuing educa-



tion course for certification. It impressed me that professionals could come together as a team to help a couple through divorce," says McKenzie.

"There is what I call the fear factor of finance in a divorce because you don't know what the financial outcome is going to be," says McKenzie. "In a collaborative divorce, there is this open sharing of information because everyone is working toward the same goal."

Everyone in the six-member group has their own practice outside of the Lake Norman Col-

laborative Divorce Group. McKenzie is a divorce financial analyst, Hartman is a licensed marriage and family therapist specializing in children, and Duszynski is a licensed clinical social worker.

All six members have at least a decade of experience in their field, and everyone has participated in the intense three-day training offered by the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals (IACP) in Arizona to prepare for their role in the collaborative group.

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"EVERYONE HAS TO BE HONEST AND PROVIDE ALL THE INFORMATION THEY HAVE," SAYS LAURA SNIDER BAKER.

"THAT'S HOW THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS WORKS. IN THE END, IF YOU DO IT RIGHT, THE OUTCOME IS POSITIVE FOR EVERYONE INVOLVED."

WORKING TOWARD THE SAME GOAL

The group meets once a month in Davidson to discuss current cases and review potential clients interested in the team approach. While they have never advertised their collaborative services, Pruitt says they would like to expand and work with more families.

The Lake Norman Collaborative Divorce Group has handled about a dozen cases since 2004, according to Pruitt, who first heard about the concept from McKenzie.

"When Debra first brought this up five years ago, we didn't rush into this overnight," says Pruitt. "It was important to each of us to build a strong, solid group that families can trust. We have spent the past few years figuring out what works best and how we can provide families with

the tools they need."

The collaborative process is not for everyone, warns Baker. As a group, they don't take cases that involve domestic violence or addiction. Couples must be collaborative in nature, willing to work honestly with each other. If there are children in the marriage, the divorcing parents must put their interests first.

"Everyone has to be honest and provide all the information they have," says Baker. "That's how the collaborative process works. In the end, if you do it right, the outcome is positive for everyone involved."

Once the group agrees to work with a family, each member meets with the client to learn more about their specific needs and establish goals.

"We look at the divorce process as a problem

to be solved, not a battle to be fought," says Pruitt.

The process can take as few as two months to as long as a year, says Baker. Unlike traditional divorce cases where court schedules and settlement negotiations determine the pace, the collaborative route allows families to structure the timeline based on their personal preference.

Minnesota lawyer Stu Webb first introduced the idea for collaborative practice during the 1980s. While collaborative divorce arrangements have grown steadily in recent years, many couples don't realize they can break up the nice way.

When McKenzie first suggested starting the group in Lake Norman, there was only one other firm (located in Raleigh) that did the same thing.

Although several groups focused on collaborative law have formed in recent years around the state, McKenzie believes there are still only two options for collaborative divorce in North Carolina. [LNC](#)

THE SCOOP

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