



Divorcing from the Status Quo

Susan Hansen and Gregory Hildebrand created the Family Mediation Center to meet evolving legal needs BY MARK SCHAAF

A significant portion of Wisconsinites need family lawyers but don't realize it, according to Gregory Hildebrand and Susan Hansen. In turn, they often decide to represent themselves.

"Some of it is cost, certainly, but I think for many people it's concern that lawyers increase or fuel conflict," Hildebrand says. "Some of it is access to the internet, and that there is now less of a need for basic procedural information that lawyers used to provide and handle exclusively. We want to fill in the blanks in the quality of their work, making certain they aren't making mistakes when they do things themselves. There isn't always a right answer when you ask a legal question. Frequently the honest answer is, 'It depends.'"

In response, the duo behind Hansen & Hildebrand in Milwaukee opened a new venture in 2015: the Family Mediation Center. The mini-chain, with locations in Milwaukee, Waukesha and Mequon, serves the clients who would otherwise represent themselves. The concept is a departure from conflict-filled proceedings involving lawyers on both sides, Hansen says, though the center still encourages its clients to seek one-on-one legal advice when appropriate. Mediators can likewise refer clients to child or financial specialists.

"It's not for everyone," Hansen says. "But it's also not just for the couples that are amicable and working really well together and want their 'Kumbaya' divorce. ... If you don't each need independent lawyers that you hire, then you can jointly retain a neutral mediator."

The center has seven mediators—some have family law practices, others are semi-retired, and one is a part-time court commissioner. Mediators begin with a two-hour meeting with the couple. For \$250, the mediator leads them through an overview of the process, legal issues that apply to them and copies of law, financial disclosure statements, and other documents they need.

"It's much more satisfying to work with a couple that, frankly, is happy when they're done, and everyone's walking out shaking hands in a conference room, rather than packing up a bag in a courtroom," Hildebrand says.


At the mediation center, clients are more involved in the outcome, he adds. "In a traditional case, you may have settlement negotiations over phone calls, letters, discovery, various court status

hearings, where the clients aren't necessarily a part of a lot of what they're paying for."

Couples who work with the center typically have between two and six meetings, though the number varies on the complexity of the case. That likewise goes for the cost, which averages between \$1,000 and \$4,000 per couple, Hansen says. With a traditional family case, each person often pays at least \$5,000 for an efficiently negotiated resolution. With conflicts and higher-asset divorces, the cost can rise exponentially, she adds.

"We want to change the culture of family law," Hansen says. "What we want to do is say, 'It's not just which lawyer you hire. It's what process do you want? Stop as a couple—individually, together—and think about your choices on how you're going to navigate.'"

Hildebrand and Hansen, who operate a separate family law practice in Milwaukee's Third Ward, view mediation as part of an evolution away from the typical divorce process. Last year, the state bar honored the center as a Wisconsin Legal Innovator.

"We're recognizing the shift in what people want," says Hansen. "Some of it is perception of lawyers, some of it is the internet—the illusion or delusion that you can just check boxes on a form, even though you don't really understand the financial or legal impact. Our goal was to look at [those who self-represent] to say, 'How can we help them get a legal education and make better decisions for themselves and their families?'" 



Gregory M. Hildebrand



Susan A. Hansen

Ring the Changes

Marriage / divorce rates* over the past century

1921: 10.7 / 1.5	1971: 10.6 / 3.7
1931: 8.6 / 1.5	1981: 10.6 / 5.3
1941: 12.7 / 2.2	1991: 9.4 / 4.7
1951: 10.4 / 2.5	2001: 8.2 / 4.0
1961: 8.5 / 2.3	2011: 6.8 / 3.6

Source: National Center for Health Statistics

*rates are the average instances per one thousand people