

Business

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Collaborative law office opens

By **BARB RANDALL**
Staff Reporter

Divorce, business conflicts, real estate disputes: These words alone can make anyone cringe. These and other situations usually require the services of an attorney — the search for which can be a stress by itself.

Attorney Dona Cullen believes resolving conflict doesn't have to be a stressful, adversarial ordeal. She has opened Cullen Mediation and Collaborative Law, P.C. in Lake Oswego to provide an alternative to the traditional approach. She specializes in intelligent dispute resolution of family law, business, real estate and estate issues.

"When two lawyers and two clients meet around a table, usually the air is filled with animosity. Collaborative law is an alternative to the normal adversarial process," she said. "It's 'nice negotiations.' All parties agree not to go to court."

Collaborative law can be used in any situation where those involved want to maintain a relationship. Unlike traditional law, collaborative law calls for full disclosure from all parties. Clients set their own goals, which are revisited throughout the process to make sure those issues are addressed. Both parties are represented by their own attorney, as well as by a mediator, financial analyst and other relevant professionals. This interdisciplinary team advises, facilitates and advocates for both clients to achieve long term goals in a non-adversarial process.

"The first step when I meet with a client is to talk about the process and get a second collaborative attorney involved, as well as a mediator, financial advisors, mental health professionals, whomever is needed," Cullen said.

The mediator helps the group stay focused on the goals of the conflicted parties.

Mental health professionals act in the capacity of a coach rather than provide therapy. They help the parties recognize and deal with grief, anger, entitlement, guilt and other emotions so the parties are able to focus on the goal of resolution.

All parties involved put their energy toward attaining the



STAFF PHOTO / BARB RANDALL

Dona Cullen, pictured, has opened Cullen Mediation and Collaboration Law, P.C. She specializes in non-adversarial resolution to legal issues.

goals of the disputants.

"As a (collaborative) attorney, you have to learn that you don't have all the answers. The clients have the answers. You are there just to keep the discussion focused," Cullen said. "The attorneys collaborate with each other and with the financial and mental health professionals. We get the help of input from each other."

Cullen finds the practice of collaborative law to be holistic, progressive and transformative. Attorneys learn to listen, how to ask questions, be attentive listeners and restate what has been said and then reframe it with reference to the goals the parties set for themselves.

"We become neutral profes-

sionals — which is a complete breakdown of the normal cultural way to handle conflict," she said.

Cullen has practiced law for 30 years, focusing on family law, real estate, business, environmental law and mediation. She entered law school after both her children were born and thoroughly enjoyed it. But she didn't enjoy working in the adversarial model. She felt the animosity and conflict was unhealthy. Unhappy with the situation, she sought an alternative to the traditional approach to practicing law. She feels she has found it in collaborative law.

"There is a real movement for law as a healing profession," she said.

She is excited about the interest she finds about collaborative law in the Portland area and is enthusiastic about training other attorneys in the collaborative methods.

Cullen is a member of the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals, Oregon Mediation Association and the Oregon State Bar Association. She offers free consultations to learn more about her services or collaborative law in general.

Dona Cullen's offices are located at 16745 Boones Ferry Road in Lake Oswego. She can be reached by phone at 503-675-3247 or by e-mail at dona@powerofpeaceportland.com.