

Workshop helps women deal with separation, divorce

By Janet Goetze

When a woman realizes that her marriage isn't working, she may feel a range of emotions that swirl into a cacophony of questions. What are the next steps to take? How will she support herself? What will life be like as a single parent?

Three professional women — a mediator, a lawyer and a financial advisor — have developed Clear Transitions PDX as a non-profit workshop for women who are in the beginning, middle or end of a separation or divorce. They recognized that some of their own clients could benefit from the information available from a diverse, experienced group of professionals about the legal, emotional and financial aspects of separation and divorce, said Meagan Robbins, a lawyer who lives in the Hollywood district.

She teamed with EJ Cortez, a financial advisor who works in the Lloyd District; and Linda Scher, a mediator whose office is on Hawthorne Boulevard. The trio sought volunteers through professional organizations to help staff the seminars, scheduled on the third Saturday of each month from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. The cost is \$30.

For a few months earlier this year, the workshops were held in Cortez's office. The idea was to provide an Eastside resource patterned after similar groups in Tigard, aimed at Westside women, and in Vancouver, Washington, for Clark County residents. However, Clear Transitions now meets at the YWCA, 1111 S.W. 10th Ave., which has become a partner in the project. The meeting place remains closer than Tigard for Eastside women, Scher noted; and eventually the founders hope to meet across the river again.

Although men have many questions and also experience emotional turmoil around divorce, Robbins said, Clear Transitions is aimed at women because they often are in different economic and power positions than men. In her family law practice, Robbins said, she has seen women who don't know their husband's income and have little information about the couple's debts or mortgage. Some women are reluctant to leave abusive relationships, she said, for fear they won't be able to feed their children.

In the seminars, Scher said, the volunteer professionals outline basic information for a woman to consider. It would be time-consuming and expensive for her to locate and make appointments with a counselor, a mediator, a lawyer and a financial advisor on her own. In addition, the women get to meet in the same room with others with similar concerns. "You can see the camaraderie," Scher said.

The seminars don't offer individual legal or financial advice, but the participants receive handouts from some professionals, including 16 pages from Clear Transitions. Those pages provide websites and telephone numbers for free or low-cost legal services; information on terminology, financial considerations and support groups for adults and children; and lists of books to help children and parents cope with divorce.

The meetings begin and end with comments from a counselor, so that women gain some idea of how to get through the current difficult period and see where they might go with their lives in the future.

"They can have some hope and optimism in life and see that it will get better," Scher said.

Yet, said Vicki Bruno, a volunteer counselor at a recent Clear Transitions workshop, divorce is a time of grieving; and women need to take care of themselves. Eat well, sleep well and have a daily activity, she advised, which may be as simple as a walk.



Three professionals have started Clear Transitions PDX workshops for women in separation or divorce. From left are financial advisor EJ Cortez, lawyer Meagan Robbins and mediator Linda Scher. Volunteers from professional groups provide information about finances, law, mediation and counseling. — Photo by Janet Goetze

A mediator at the workshop, Bryan R. Welch, said he acts as a neutral third party to help couples have a conversation and reach an agreement. In Multnomah County, he said, those with children may be required to seek mediation to agree on support and other issues related to child rearing.

Brent Hamilton, a financial advisor, offered workshop attendees an outline for becoming financially independent and the steps to take in what he called "financial fact-finding." Those details may include total household expenses, taxes, children's college funding, medical and dental plans, and credit card debt. Women needing to reenter the workforce may seek spousal support to update job skills, Hamilton said.

Family therapy can help people through grief and loss, Bruno said. It's also important to remember, she said, "It's a transition that people move through."

Surviving divorce

What: Clear Transitions PDX provides community and professional resources for women in the divorce process.

When: 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. on the third Saturday of the month.

Where: YWCA, 1111 S.W. 10th Ave.

Cost: \$30; some assistance available.

Register: ywcapdx.org/events/navigating-surviving-divorce/.

Information: Linda Scher, (503) 232-8550.