

# A MULTIDOOR LAW OFFICE

Divorce Clients at this Firm Can Get Team Advice on Emotional and Financial Issues

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**I**T WAS IN GALVESTON, TEXAS, IN THE FALL OF 2002 that Boston lawyer and mediator David Hoffman had something of a revelation. It happened in a break-out session during the annual meeting of the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals. There were about 80 people in the room, and the topic of discussion was multidisciplinary teams—in this case, lawyers working together with therapists and financial professionals.

“I asked the assembled group for a showing of hands: ‘How many of you are currently working in offices that you share with people from another discipline?’” Surprised when only a couple of hands went up, he asked another question. “‘How many of you would like to be, or see that as a positive direction for your practice?’”

Almost every hand in the room went up. “That was a very exciting moment,” Hoffman says, “because it was the first time that I knew I was not alone in wanting to follow this path with our work.”

On Aug. 15, that path officially came to fruition when Hoffman opened the Boston Law Collaborative, a “multidoor,” multidisciplinary dispute resolution firm. Hoffman and the rest of the BLC team are committed to the notion of a multidoor practice (named after Harvard law professor Frank Sander’s notion of the multidoor courthouse).

With this approach, a client can choose to see just a lawyer, or to also consult with other pro-

fessionals. Key members of the Boston Law Collaborative include Harvard psychologist Richard Wolman and certified financial planner Susan Miller. Another is Dina Beach Lynch, who provides Web-based conflict management information and advice.

Before the firm opened, Hoffman ran the Boston office of The New Law Center, whose other office, in Newton, Mass., was entirely dedicated to achieving collaborative solutions to legal problems. For them, going to court was not an option.

It was for Hoffman, even though his strong preference was, and remains, for collaborative processes. An experienced family lawyer and a gifted mediator, he chose not to eschew the option of going to court. To him, it is a tool, among many others, that can be useful to clients, particularly in family law when it may be necessary to defend a complaint or, in cases of domestic violence, to seek protective orders.

In fact, the two offices developed in their own ways to the point where they agreed to separate, with the Boston office becoming the BLC.

What Hoffman envisioned, and what he now oversees, is based on a model that has existed for some time, though it has rarely been used. The basic idea is to offer clients a range of approaches to resolving their problems. What Hoffman and Co. are trying to add to that is the feel of real community among diverse professionals using their diverse skills to pull in one direction. Their goal: to make clients feel seen, heard and cared for in an emotionally respectful atmosphere.

“I think the average lawyer does not work closely enough with professionals in other fields,” says Hoffman. “I know that was true of me. ... But it’s a rare family law client whose legal issues do not have both emotional and financial dimensions.”

GO WITH THE RULES HOFFMAN SAYS THAT although many lawyers are skittish about trying multidisciplinary practice, the same basic rules that were established 10 years ago to govern such practices are still in place. As long as the nonlawyers keep their practices separate—in this case they rent space from BLC—and they do not share fees or get a vote in firm governance, the firm is able to reap



the benefits of their presence. "Here," says Hoffman, "when a client comes to us with a problem, we can ask, 'Do you want a neutral or a lawyer?' The answer will make all the difference in terms of what kind of conversation you then have. And then, 'Do you think you'll need a therapist? A financial adviser? Do you want to work with them as a team, or keep it all separate?' These are some of our intake questions."

Then, Hoffman adds, "Because we're all here, and we have a high level of trust and respect for one another, we can do things very efficiently. If clients give us permission to discuss their cases, then, for example, if we're working on a sophisticated intergenerational wealth-transfer case, we can drop in and talk to each other about how different approaches might serve the client. Dr. Wolman, for example, recognizes patterns in the area of interpersonal psychology that I don't see."

Solving complex family, business and employment issues creates a kind of synergy, says Hoffman. "It gives us a wonderful opportunity to create case-specific teams. I think it's clear we provide better client services because people here feel a sense of co-ownership, without turning it into a co-op or a commune, which isn't permitted."

Hoffman, a Harvard Law alum who has also taught at his alma mater, was a partner for 17 years at Boston's Hill & Barlow, which dissolved late in 2002, less than a year after he had moved on to TNLC. He did not dislike big-firm life; in fact, he has little but praise for Hill & Barlow. And he did adopt one big-firm practice, first at his office at The New Law Center and then for the BLC: a somewhat hierarchical structure. Olive Larson, one of Hoffman's lawyer colleagues, describes him as the partner and the other four lawyers who practice there as the associates. A fifth lawyer was also expected to join the firm.

"So there is, technically, a hierarchy," Larson says, "but you'd never know it." That's because of the determination to create a sense of community and the obvious mutual respect shared among the BLC's professionals.

Larson, who spent about 15 years practicing family law on her own and at a traditional downtown firm, likes to draw comparisons between her earlier experience and life at the Boston Law Collaborative. "When I worked at a litigation firm and a client came in, the first question was always, 'What are we filing in court?'" she says. "Here, the question is, 'What's the best mechanism for you? Do you want a lawyer or a mediator?' Or, if there is domestic violence involved, then we can go to court, because courts are extremely good at dealing with that."

"Clients are much more involved in the situation here," Larson says. "They can make their own decisions, which really empowers them. What that means is that they don't end up with a sense of 'how did I get here?' In some law firms, it's almost as though the client is incidental to the matter," she says. "Here, the client is the matter."

Being a veteran of the traditional way of handling family law problems, Larson says the BLC, with its multidimensional approach, "is more the way folks need to be treated in these situations—paying attention to the emotional and financial turmoil they are going through.

"And it is more efficient," she says. "In two hours you're able to accomplish so much. You have all the resources at the table. And there's no posturing going on because we're all working for the advantage of our clients."

"I'm glad I worked in a traditional firm because I got toughened," Larson adds. "I learned how it was out there. But I wouldn't ever want to go back to that ever again."

#### MULTIDIMENSIONAL HELP

ONE OF THE FIRM'S CLIENTS, WHO ASKED THAT HIS NAME not be used out of respect for the family's need for privacy, said he chose Hoffman's group (at the time still part of The New Law Center) because of its breadth of experience in collaborative law and because of the nonlawyer professionals who were available on staff.

"David and his colleagues saw me as a whole person," he says, "not as just another guy going through a divorce. They really recognized the complexity of my state of mind, which was initially one of shock. It was great to be able to get advice from a number of professionals."

In the financial realm, he says, he got the advice he needed on such things as the tax impact of child support and alimony, as well as the implications of selling the marital home or of one spouse buying the other out. "It was all new to me, and having someone like Susan Miller, who was both highly competent and compassionate, was a great help," he says.

He also met with Dr. Wolman, who, he says, helped him "move forward to a place where I could deal intelligently with issues that are part of the divorce process."

Another thing this client appreciated was the fact that Hoffman was conscientious about assigning jobs that really didn't require his level of expertise to others in the office, who billed at a lower rate than he does.

The client says that, although the law can be a very powerful, effective tool, "I also knew it had limitations for achieving a constructive outcome." What worked, he says, was the way Hoffman was able to "quarterback" the situation, and pull in the right people at the right time to serve his financial, emotional and legal needs.

"A great deal of attention was given to where I was mentally," he says. "They brought a sense of compassion to what was an extraordinarily difficult process. They were emotionally very respectful."

Hoffman refers to the approach as taking a three-dimensional view of what people need when they're having legal difficulties. "I'm finding a real synergy because my circle of friends and contacts are people who have this more three-dimensional view, and they fear sending people to a place with a one-dimensional view."

So far, interest in the firm has been such that the need for its unique services is apparent. Hoffman is delighted. He says, "I believe in my heart that the multidoor approach is the way to go." ■

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