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Court classes aid in peaceful transitions

By **MARY ANN FERGUS**
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Family Law Judge Georgia Dempster finalizes most divorces with the same message:

"I hereby grant you a divorce. But Mr. and Mrs. so-and-so, you are never going to be divorced as long as your children will be alive. Children will get married, they will have children, they will have births, first communions, bar mitzvahs... that will always bring the mother and father together. Although your marriage has formally ended... as far as the children are concerned, you will be never divorced."

Dempster, who has presided over the 308th Family District Court since 1995, hopes her words remind couples to put their children first and find a way to get along as parents, if not spouses.

Achieving such a peaceful state, Dempster understands, is difficult.

Before granting a divorce, Dempster and the other judges presiding over the nine family law courts in Harris County require parents to attend at least a four-hour parenting class that teaches practical skills to ease the impact of divorce on children.

Classes cover issues such as disciplining children from different homes, dropping off and picking up children, and dealing with holidays and birthdays.

Last week, most of the family courts began offering another option; a workshop called "Stop The

Conflict," offered by Bill Ferguson, a Houston author and relationship expert.

Ferguson, 55, is a former attorney who found he had a knack for helping couples leave each other on good terms. About 15 percent of his divorce clients ended up staying married, making Ferguson issue a warning: "If you get back together, you don't get your fees back."

In 1982, Ferguson offered his first workshop to divorcing or troubled couples.

Three years later, he quit his law practice and has led more than 2,500 workshops and has written several books. He was featured on *Oprah* in 1994 after self-publishing *How to Heal a Painful Relationship*. His most recent book, also self-published, is *Have You Suffered Enough?*

With no formal training, Ferguson doesn't call himself a counselor, but rather a "consultant." He often works with couples in just one or two two-hour sessions, either in person or on the phone.

Ferguson, in his third marriage, says he developed his approach through his many workshops and personal experience. His parents also divorced when he was in high school.

"My parents' divorce was very

clean, it was just super clean. That was my role model," Ferguson says. "So I thought, 'Why should it be anything other than that?'"

But the Houston native's first marriage and divorce was destructive, and he wasn't able to understand his role in it for several years. He later came to understand that under his resentment was hurt, and under that hurt was love. Second, he came to see his role in the relationship's end.

His second marriage ended after 15 years, but they remain friends.

Ferguson's technique for restoring relationships - whether people are dating, engaged, married or divorced, includes several parts.

The first involves identifying the cycle of conflict and taking sole responsibility for it.

Part 2 of Ferguson's technique involves healing the hurt that fuels the conflict.

Most people carry some sort of "hurt" from the past, according to Ferguson. It's often something they were taught as children or simply have come to believe about themselves, such as "I'm not good enough." Until they heal that hurt, people will engage in self-sabotaging behavior, which creates upset and a cycle of conflict, Ferguson says.

"That hurt that we all have — trying to heal that hurt is the single most important thing a person can do as far as (making) their life work," he says.

The third stage is cleaning the slate, which includes letting go of resentment, blaming and hanging on too tightly to partners. Even happily married couples must be willing to lose to each other, Ferguson says.

Finally, couples must tell each other they take responsibility for the conflict, ask for forgiveness and if necessary, give the person more freedom.

A core concept of Ferguson's technique is accepting people as they are or, as he puts it, "surrendering to the truth."

"The biggest killer for relationships is not accepting someone for who they are," Ferguson says. "Because the truth is, people are going to be who they are whether we accept them or not."

Sometimes people can accept their partners but no longer want to stay married to them. With such acceptance, Ferguson says, people can divorce as friends.

"For the most part, people don't know there is a choice because our culture doesn't give them a choice," he says. "All of the advice our culture gives is adversarial. People need to know there is a choice in how they handle divorce."



Ferguson

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