

# Working Together to Be Apart

The Bucks County Collaborative Law Group provides an option for those who consider divorce a problem to solve, not a war to win *by BILL DONAHUE*

**Preparing for a** divorce has been likened to getting ready for a potentially brutal and protracted battle, leaving each combatant unsure as to what his or her life will look like after the dust settles. There is, however, an option known as collaborative divorce, and many of those who have gone this route—as well as its practitioners—suggest it can be a superior alternative to conventional litigated divorce.

Although not nearly as widely practiced as litigation in the United States, collaborative divorce has gained increasing traction since 1990, when a Minneapolis family law attorney named Stu Webb set the collaborative movement in motion. The reason is simple: Although any divorce can be a life-changing event, collaborative divorce can help to not only bring about a compassionate end to a marriage, but also lead to a healthy new beginning.

Collaborative divorce is designed to help couples who no longer wish to be married manage the surplus of complicated issues that inevitably follow, from the legal obstacles, to concerns about children, property and finances, to the emotional well-being of all parties involved. In a collaborative divorce, the couple is guided by a team of independent professionals who work together to create a comprehensive agreement designed to achieve a positive long-term outcome for each party, all without stepping foot into the courtroom.

“In a litigated divorce, by the time you’re getting to court, you’re letting someone else make

the decisions for you,” says Meredith J. Buck, R.N., a former nurse turned family law attorney based in Chalfont, who specializes in collaborative cases. “But who knows your family better than you? Why would you let someone else decide where your children sleep at night? When you stay in control and you make the decisions, which is what you do in a collaborative situation, you get a win-win instead of a win-lose.”

In Bucks County and surrounding areas, an increasing number of divorcing couples are turning to the professionals who belong to the Bucks County Collaborative Law Group (BCCLG) for

guidance in the collaborative process. Most members of BCCLG, which was founded in 2009, say they chose to receive formal training in the many facets of collaborative divorce because they saw it as a healthier, more productive approach to ending a marriage.

“In many ways, collaborative divorce is more challenging for an attorney,” says Elissa C. Goldberg, a family law attorney based in Doylestown. “Litigation is straightforward, where both sides present their case and the judge makes the decision. Here, you’re trying to deal with everyone’s goals and interests and emotions, which could be competing against one another. Ultimately it’s about getting both parties into the best possible position for the years ahead, without going to court and without losing their rights.”

In a typical collaborative agreement, the couple pledges to resolve their issues outside of the courtroom; agrees to a complete and open exchange of information; and commits to reaching an amicable solution that takes into account the interests of the couple and any children involved. Guiding them through the process is an interdisciplinary team consisting of two attorneys (one for each party), a divorce coach and a neutral financial specialist. A neutral child specialist is brought in as needed, as are other resources and professionals.

“It typically begins with a five-way meeting: the two clients, the two attorneys and the divorce coach,” says Joseph D. Visco, a family law attorney based in Doylestown, as well as a founding father of BCCLG. “After a few meetings with the financial neutral to tie down any loose ends, the attorneys draft a contract, which gets shared, and any lingering issues are discussed. All along there are conversations between the professionals, as well as between each attorney and his or her client. There’s constant interaction that helps support the team as a whole. The goal is to be efficient, which saves money, and they’re making decisions for themselves, which is crucial.”

The divorce coach guides both parties as they restructure their family. By providing mental health and emotional support, the divorce coach also helps the parties stay centered and



## ABOUT THE BUCKS COUNTY COLLABORATIVE LAW GROUP

### Collaborative Attorneys

Members of the Bucks County Collaborative Law Group include attorneys, financial specialists, divorce coaches and other allied professionals whose collective goal is to help divorcing couples move forward with their lives in the most positive way possible. These professionals include:



**Meredith J. Buck, R.N.**  
Chalfont  
215-997-6345  
[www.meredithbucklaw.com](http://www.meredithbucklaw.com)



**Elissa C. Goldberg**  
Doylestown  
215-345-5259  
[www.elissagoldberg.com](http://www.elissagoldberg.com)



**MaryBeth McCabe**  
Doylestown  
215-345-0492  
[www.marybethmccabelaw.com](http://www.marybethmccabelaw.com)



**Tiffany Thomas-Smith**  
Newtown  
215-860-3747  
[www.thomasmthfirm.com](http://www.thomasmthfirm.com)



**Joseph D. Visco**  
Doylestown  
215-348-3755  
[www.viscolawoffices.com](http://www.viscolawoffices.com)

in touch with their own needs, according to Carol L. O'Connell, a former attorney turned mediator who owns Princeton Mediation, which has offices in New Hope and Newtown, as well as in Hopewell, N.J.

"Parties have to traverse all of this emotional terrain to get to the point where they can enter into a settlement agreement that frames out their future life as a family, and they often still are a family afterward because there are children involved," O'Connell says. "We have these auxiliary professionals as part of the whole team looking at how to get people from being an intact family to two separate households, and it's a conscious, comprehensive process. A litigated divorce does not necessarily address any of these issues."

In addition to members of the "standard" collaborative team, BCCLG includes ancillary professionals such as Realtors, mortgage brokers, insurance brokers and credit counselors, among others—essentially, any resource someone enduring a divorce might need, both during the process and after the marriage is formally dissolved.

"I think of it as a more supported divorce," says Christina Carson-Sacco, Ph.D., a psychologist with a private practice in Warrington, who also acts as a divorce coach and child specialist in collaborative cases. "Rather than 'My attorney fights your attorney,' we've got people who are trained to support each party legally, people who are trained to support them financially and people who are trained to support them emotionally. It's also looking out for kids in a different way, if there are children. It doesn't mean it's going to be easier and it doesn't mean it's going to be fun, but it does mean we're working together for the best possible outcome."

Craig Lichtman, M.D., M.B.A., is a divorce coach, family business mediator and consultant, as well as a practicing psychiatrist and psychotherapist. He adds, "Coming from a background in health care, I was used to multidisciplinary collaboration with my fellow physicians.

To me, if divorce is necessary, there is no better way to confront the challenges than with the support and guidance of a multidisciplinary team of collaborative professionals committed to focusing on the health and welfare of all members of the entire family."

Although separations of any kind tend to be rife with emotion, collaborative divorce enables parties to deal with these emotions head on. As a result, couples can make clear-headed decisions based on the future. So says Marianna Goldenberg, a Certified Divorce Financial Analyst and principal of Curo Wealth Management in Langhorne, who serves as a financial neutral on collaborative cases.

"After all the emotions have been dealt with, a divorce is basically a business decision," Goldenberg says. "If you can manage the emotional part of it, then people can think clearly and say, 'Let's put the numbers on the table and make some decisions about what happens next.' As financial neutrals, we're looking 10, 20, even 30 years down the road, so once people understand everything will be OK for them financially, they are more open while going through the process."

"Essentially, divorce is two things: parenting and property," adds Paul T. Murray, ChFC, CDFP, of PTM Wealth Management in Chalfont. "By incorporating neutral professionals, like coaches and financial planners, collaborative divorce offers couples the opportunity to make truly smart decisions around difficult and emotional issues."

Although the collaborative process might appear to be more expensive because of the multiple professionals involved, this is not necessarily the case. Consider, for example, the fact that most collaborative cases reach their conclusion in quicker fashion than conventional cases—sometimes as quickly as three months. In the words of Tiffany Thomas-Smith, a family law attorney whose practice is based in Yardley, the collaborative process is designed to preserve assets, not consume them.

"At the end of the day, we're looking for you to keep your money," Thomas-Smith says, "whereas in the litigation process, we're going to spend the money, because that's what the process requires."

Mark Byelich, CFP, CDFP, AIF, managing partner of Attleboro Wealth Management in Langhorne, adds, "In collaborative divorce, all parties are working toward common financial goals. By engaging a financial neutral, clients benefit from having a uniquely trained professional working with them and the whole collaborative team to help them have the best chance of financial success after the divorce is complete."

Of course, collaborative divorce isn't for everyone. It requires each party to commit to a framework of open communication, respect and cooperation, as well as ethical behavior and a prioritization of the needs of the couple's children, if there are any. For those who meet these criteria, however, collaborative divorce has the potential to be a superior alternative.

"People who are going through the divorce process or a separation need to know they have options, and they need to investigate the process," says MaryBeth McCabe, a family law attorney and mediator whose practice is based in Doylestown. "For me, collaborative divorce has had a positive effect on my personal life, as well as on how I practice. It makes me think that it's a good time to be practicing family law, because no matter what happens in a litigated divorce, the client is never happy, often because people lose sight of anything but fighting each other.

"Now, with collaborative divorce, we're moving toward where divorce should be." ■



Visit [www.buckscountycollaborativelaw.com](http://www.buckscountycollaborativelaw.com) for more information on the Bucks County Collaborative Law Group. For additional resources regarding the collaborative divorce process, visit the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals' website at [www.collaborativepractice.com](http://www.collaborativepractice.com).

### Financial Specialists



Mark Byelich, CFP, CDFP, AIF  
Langhorne  
215-310-9440  
[www.attleborowealth.com](http://www.attleborowealth.com)



Marianna Goldenberg, CDFP  
Langhorne  
215-486-8350  
[www.curowm.com](http://www.curowm.com)



Paul T. Murray, ChFC, CDFP  
Chalfont  
855-786-9584  
[www.ptmwealth.com](http://www.ptmwealth.com)

### Divorce Coaches/Child Specialists



Christina Carson-Sacco, Psy.D.  
Warrington  
215-491-1119  
[www.thecenterinwarrington.com](http://www.thecenterinwarrington.com)



Craig Lichtman, M.D., M.B.A.  
Philadelphia, Wynnewood  
215-567-7336



Carol L. O'Connell  
New Hope  
215-862-0226  
[www.princetonmediation.com](http://www.princetonmediation.com)