

TALK IT OUT

Mediation makes divorce more civil

Check credentials before you sit down

Divorce does not have to be like "The War of the Roses," the movie in which the husband and wife destroy their home and fight to the death, rather than give into one another on any issue.

"After 20 years of marriage, divorce is very tough," said Norma, whose name has been changed to protect her privacy.

"We decided to handle this in a way that would take into account the fact that we are two bright, well-educated people who are smart about a lot of things, but who needed help taking this step. Mediation was the right way to go for us, and our family.

The mediator who guided them through the process was Michael Becker, a Westport lawyer-mediator.

Norma initially met with a friend who also was a divorce lawyer to discuss her pending divorce. This attorney suggested she meet Becker, whose practice is devoted exclusively to couples mediation.

"Divorce litigation is a terribly destructive way to end a marriage," said Becker.

"Mediation offers couples an opportunity to maintain control over many of the decisions they will need to make. Selecting a mediator is similar to finding the right doctor. People need to ask many questions."

The going rate for mediation in Fairfield County is \$250 per hour; however, rates have been found within Connecticut from \$85 per hour and up, Becker said.

"We paid after every session, which really helped. We always knew where we stood, and didn't worry about getting hit with huge hourly legal fees we couldn't handle," Norma said.

Becker, who is a past president of the Connecticut Council on Divorce Mediation, the statewide professional organization for certified mediators, has these tips for choosing a mediator:

● **Ask about their experience.** How many divorce mediations have they done? "Many professional mediators are also attorneys or mental health professionals who may occasionally mediate a divorce," said Becker.

● **Ask about their completion rate.** "The mediator's skill level is reflected in their failure rate — the number of mediated cases that do not go through to completion, or number of cases accepted by the court."

● **Look for a broad range of professional experience.** Becker is not only a lawyer, he is also an accountant.

Professionals from a variety of backgrounds can become certified mediators.

"Look for someone who knows and understands the laws, and keeps up with them, can work with finances and interpersonal issues, who understands what is actually happening with people when they are going through a divorce."

● **Look for professional affiliation on both the state and national levels,** with the Connecticut Council for Divorce Mediation and The Academy of Family Mediation. Inquire about their level of certification.

Titles and categories to look for include practitioner member of the Academy, advanced mediation training, and Academy-approved consultant.

— SHERYL WOLFF KAYNE

Michael Becker, Attorney Mediator

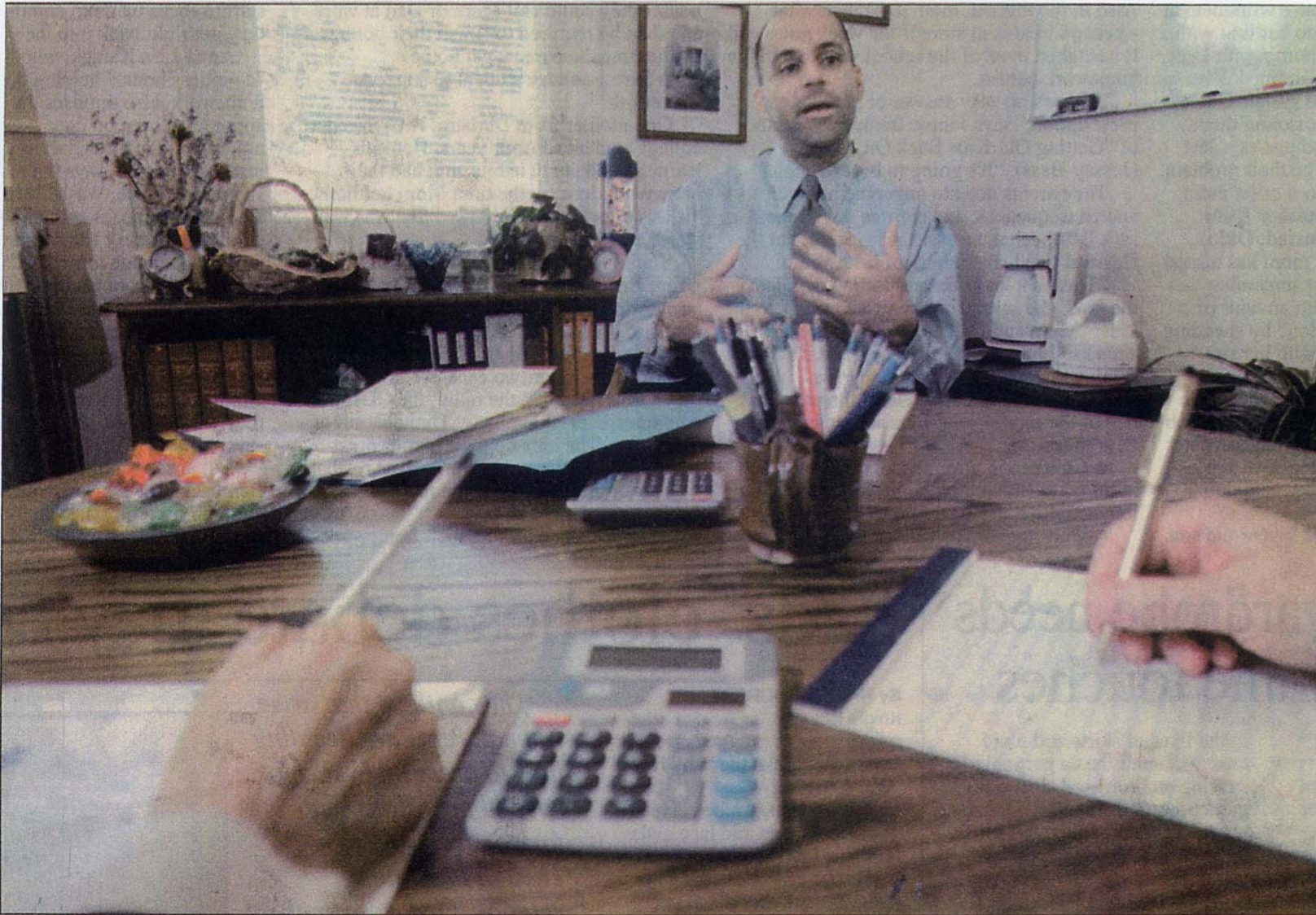
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Fostering agreement: Michael Becker, a lawyer-mediator in Westport, seats divorcing couples at a round table with paper, pens, calculator and sometimes a toy or two to play with during mediation sessions.