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Rending Fences

AUTHOR LARRY McMURTRY ONCE wrote, “No illusion is more crucial than the illusion that great success and huge money buy you immunity from the common ills of mankind, such as cars that won’t start.”

Add to this list the pain of divorce, something financial advisor Kathleen Miller knows all too well from professional experience.

Most people, when they think of divorce, imagine a husband and wife cordoned off in different mediation rooms with lawyers shuttling in and out of the chambers. Rarely do you think of a financial planner being there.

But Miller, president of Miller Advisors in Kirkland, Wash., right across Lake Washington east of Seattle, has become something of a doctor without borders in the area. For more than 20 years, she’s been helping women (and men) from riven marriages figure out a rational way to put their financial houses back in order. Her focus is often on disadvantaged spouses (both men

and women) who for whatever reason gave up their careers or took themselves out of the job market to stay at home with the kids but then suddenly found themselves single, unloved, untrained, and scared witless. Especially scared about money, the mammon that most didn’t have to think about before.

Often, the people she works with have handicapped themselves by staying out of the investment or money side of the family’s life and focusing instead on the spending. They may have taken themselves out of the workforce because they had agreed that supporting the home was their job. They may have been abandoned or cheated on. Often, they’re too emotional to make clear decisions.

Now that the marriage is ending, it’s time to decide whether their spouses may have hidden assets from them or tried to force settlements before they know how much money is at stake.

“I’m very interested in how men, women—how we act [in money relationships], where we get our money system—

Planner Kathleen Miller has made a niche business out of helping divorcing couples untangle their assets and move on.

By Eric Rasmussen

from our parents, in our marriage. How we pass it onto our children. I'm just very intrigued with that," says Miller.

Miller's become such an expert in the area, she's regularly called upon for mediation and arbitration and asked to appear as an expert witness at divorce proceedings. She landed on the *Worth* magazine Top 100 Wealth Advisors for 2007 and expects to again this year.

It's a long way from her humble beginnings. Miller grew up on a large dairy farm in Iowa, the first female child in a family with four brothers and a much

younger sister. Among other things, she canned corn, beans, pickles and tomatoes for the winter larder and learned about money playing Monopoly with a group of aggressive brothers, an early primer, she says, in learning not to back down when a man screams at her about money. Her first paying job at 14 was detasseling corn for a dollar an hour. She finally walked off duty in 100 degree heat, deciding she was being underpaid.

her MBA in 1980 and then got a CFP license. Her immersion in the financial planning process paralleled the beginnings of the profession itself, and as she met with varying estate planning attorneys and investment partners dealing with her old boss's holdings, a fledgling business sprung from the ashes and her financial planning business took off. "My business has always been built from referrals for the most part."

Around 1985, she met a client who would redefine her career yet again—the wife of a corporate executive and mother of four grown children who needed to be assimilated back into the single life after her marriage fell apart. The woman was going to have a hard time being retrained. Miller had once again found a calling.

"It really was very serendipitous because I really would never have thought of that as a particular area. It's just that there was a need and I was very creative in coming up with a solution that worked for both parties; I've always been after a win-win." Among other things she was able to show the husband was that his settlement offer in mediation (which is where most divorces are settled, rather than in court) was drastically different

than the historical spending patterns Miller had found for the house. Also, at her age, the woman's prospects for being retrained were very slim.

Miller's book, *Fair Share Divorce for Women*, is a primer for those who are about to be thrown back into the big chill of single life. It's not a legal book, exactly. Rather, it forges an agenda of items that women might not be thinking about when the storm clouds of a divorce gather.

Of course, the old nuclear family model has changed, and many women today are the alpha earners too, not just men, but Miller addressed her book to women anyway, she says, because of different behaviors she perceived between the sexes toward money, something she's been thinking about ever since she learned her values in Iowa.

"Women sell their values when they get into marriage. They just bury them. That's one of the reasons why they get divorces also," she argues. "They bury their money personality."

"I can't tell you how many people I know who are in their 40s who get their divorce, and she was an engineer, as an example, and when the two kids came along she stopped working. You try and go back after being out of the engineering profession for 10 years. You may as well start your work over again."

It's more difficult and labor intensive than you would imagine to do this kind of advisory work, and requires a gimlet-eyed view of what the budget was right before the divorce and what it's going to be like in the years right after. Usually neither person in the couple has a grasp of where the money was really going.

She starts with money personality tests. Miller, who has herself been happily married for 37 years, says she has come to see how two married people often look at their money the same way two blind men look at the proverbial elephant—very differently. One spouse often sees it as something to make; the other as something to spend. Thus many times neither one appreciates the other's role in the financial relationship, which can make consensus even more difficult when the marriage comes unraveled. The money

"I DIDN'T GET AN ALLOWANCE BECAUSE I WAS A GIRL. THE PERCEPTION WAS THAT I WOULD OVERSPEND IT ANYWAY, BECAUSE I WAS THE GIRL."
—KATHLEEN MILLER