

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 159, No. 189

16 years later, think tank series run by divorce lawyers still going strong

BY JOHN FLYNN ROONEY

Law Bulletin staff writer

In 1997, attorney Gemma B. Allen began noticing breakdowns in communication between professionals working with divorcing couples and their families.

So Allen and Ronald S. Ladden, then partners at Pretzel & Stouffer Chtd., started sponsoring a series of think tanks focused on marriage and divorce topics.

Allen and Ladden continued those sessions when they launched their own law firm, Law Offices of Ladden & Allen Chtd., in 1999. To date, they've hosted 50 think-tank sessions, each attended by 25 or more people.

"People don't understand the divorce process and what people are going through emotionally, legally or financially," Allen said. "We started the think tanks to improve communications among those who are serving people in divorces."

The firm invites judges, attorneys, family therapists, financial consultants and clergy members to attend the sessions, usually conducted three times

annually. Topics for the think tanks range from domestic violence to the economics of marriage and divorce.

The think tanks are intended to provide a dual purpose, Allen said.

"We're going to try to help people do their marriages better," she said. "Sometimes divorces have to be — and for those people, we'll help them do the divorces together."

Cook County Circuit Judge Michele F. Lowrance was a featured speaker at a 2010 session about "The Good Karma Divorce," which is also the title of a book she wrote. She has attended other sessions as a spectator and called the think tanks a "learning institution."

"I got to present (remarks) not only to lawyers and judges but also to mental health professionals, which is one of the great things about the interdisciplinary learning that the think tank is devoted to," Lowrance said.

Randy Wayne Franklin, a Buffalo Grove divorce lawyer, has attended six or seven of the think tanks. The presenters are a diverse group of people who are experts in their given fields.

"Everybody participates and



Gemma B. Allen

it's a great learning experience," Franklin said.

Franklin sometimes acts as a children's representative in divorce cases.

"I oftentimes need expertise to direct my clients and my children for therapeutic interventions," he said. "I have found resources (at the think tanks) and the networking is excellent."

The next think tank focusing on lawyer-assisted mediation is set to run 9 a.m. to noon Saturday at The Peninsula Chicago, 108 E. Superior St.



Michele F. Lowrance

There is no fee to attend.

The featured speakers are Karen G. Shields, a retired Cook County associate judge and current neutral at JAMS Inc., along with Beverly Tarr, a Chicago-based divorce mediator.

As many as 50 people may attend the session, Allen said.

"I think it makes us better lawyers with the give-and-the take and the fact that we get to pick someone with expertise" to present, she said. "I think we learn as much as we give."