

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

THURSDAY, MARCH 8, 2007

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Law Firms Pitch Themselves as the Divorced Guy's Guys

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Atlanta

ONE RECENT winter evening, 35 mostly middle-aged and graying men gathered in a plush carpeted hotel conference room here. They listened intently, some taking notes, as a lawyer ticked off advice for handling a divorce:

Have a friend videotape you with the kids to prove you play with them. Don't move out of the house until you're forced to by a court. And don't let your wife goad you into revealing your strategy for winning custody of the kids.

"You should never confide in anyone who is trying to take all your money and your children," lectured the lawyer, Scott Trout.

Mr. Trout is managing partner of Cordell & Cordell P.C., a domestic litigation firm that specializes in representing men—or, as firm co-founder Joseph E. Cordell prefers, "guys."

Cordell & Cordell is among the most ambitious of a breed of law firms that has emerged to capitalize on the fathers' rights movement, which believes that courts slight men in divorce and especially in child custody cases.

Even though laws in most states now decree that courts base such decisions on the child's "best interest," rather than giving preference to mothers, fathers' rights groups contend that outdated notions about the role of fathers in child care—and what they see as the outsized influence of women's advocacy groups—can still stack the deck against dads. Men, Mr. Cordell explains on his firm's Web site, need advocates to counter "influential organizations outside the mainstream of society and their insistence on women's interests to the utter exclusion of the merits of a given case."

National lawyers' associations don't track the number of family law firms that specialize by gender, but at least one father-focused firm can now be found in most of the biggest U.S. cities. Such outfits include Jeffery Leving and his Dadsrights.com Web site, in Chicago; Lang, Berman & Lebit on Long Island in New York, which hosts the "nyfather-rights.com" Web site; and Dadslaw Inc. in Orange, Calif., near Los Angeles.



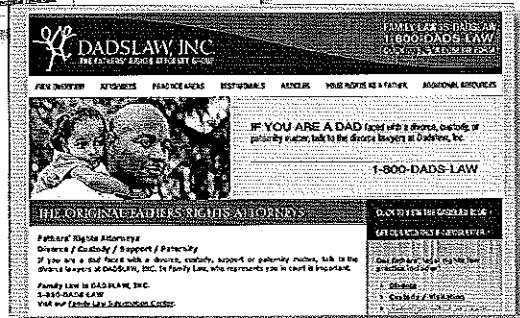
DadsDivorce.com and DadsLaw.com feature law firms that cater to divorced fathers.

To be sure, there are firms and nonprofit organizations that focus on representing women in divorce cases, particularly those involving domestic violence. They include networks such as Divorce Attorneys for Women, or DAWN, in Grand Rapids, Mich., which maintains the www.dawnforwomen.com site.

Some legal observers say firms focusing on either men or women can foster confrontation between parents, rather than negotiation of an amicable settlement. "They fuel the gender wars, which is not in the best interest of the children," says Andrew Schepard, a family law professor at Hofstra University School of Law in Hempstead, N.Y.

Mr. Cordell says it's reasonable for men to advocate for themselves: "Guys often have to work a little harder to be awarded primary custody. When you're disadvantaged, you'll continue to be so unless you do what you can to help yourself."

Cordell & Cordell, based in St. Louis, recently has been on an expansion blitz. It operates in six states and promotes itself on sports radio stations as "A Partner Men Can Count On." The firm maintains the Dadsdivorce.com Web site, where men who feel beleaguered can buy books like: "Civil War: A Father's Guide to Winning Child Custody," written by Mr. Cordell (\$24.95). An online "Probability Calculator" lets a husband answer



'Yes' or 'No' questions to gauge how likely it is that his spouse is having an affair. (Sample query: Has your wife recently suggested or had cosmetic surgery?). The firm also hosts seminars like the one held in Atlanta, with titles like, "The Ten Stupidest Mistakes Men Make When Facing Divorce."

The firm's clients include men like Rick Fiedler, 47, a printing executive who heard about it when a St. Louis sports announcer endorsed it on the radio. Mr. Fiedler, who was already divorced, says he successfully sought custody of his teenage daughter because she was doing poorly in school. "A lot of times, guys aren't the person who should have the children," he says. "But sometimes, it is better that way."

Mr. Cordell, 48, says his firm is not a political vehicle, even though his firm's Web site links to groups such as Washington-based American Coalition for Fathers and Children, which lobbies, for example, for laws that would require courts to adopt joint legal and physical custody of children as the presumed standard. "Our guys . . . don't have the time to invest in legislative or social move-

(over please)

ments," he says. "They're fighting for their families, not a cause."

Women's legal advocates scoff at the notion that men are underdogs in most divorce cases. Despite economic advances by women, men still tend to make more money, giving them greater resources to use in court. "One third of the calls we get are mothers who are desperate because the court is considering or has already given custody to an abusive father," says Kathy Rodgers, president of New York-based nonprofit Legal Momentum, which advocates for women.

Reliable national statistics on outcomes of child-custody disputes are scant. A 1997 study in the *Family Law Quarterly* examined appeals court cases over a span of 70 years and found that despite changes in the law, mothers and fathers have been favored roughly equally in child-custody disputes.

Mr. Cordell earned his law degree from the University of Texas in 1989 and shortly afterward started a law firm in St. Louis with his second wife, Yvonne, whom he married in 1991. (Mr. Cordell and his first wife divorced in 1983; the couple had no children and the experience wasn't a factor in his decision to represent men in divorce cases, he says. His first wife couldn't be reached for comment.) Cordell & Cordell began as a general law practice but gradually began focusing on domestic relations. (The couple has two children, and Mrs. Cordell

spends much of her time now caring for them).

He says he was affected by an early case in which a client lost custody of his children, despite the woman's drinking problem, after she falsely accused him of physical abuse. The case convinced him that abuse allegations can be "a shibboleth waved by women in divorce cases," Mr. Cordell says.

It also became apparent that divorcing dads offered a fertile legal niche. "We were struck by the challenges that guys seem to face . . . in divorces, in pursuit of primary custody," he recalled. "It occurred to us: 'This is something we could really focus on.'"

By about 1997, Cordell & Cordell was focused primarily on men. In 2001, it expanded into Kansas City, added Atlanta in 2004, Indianapolis in 2005, and Dallas and Chicago last year. It has grown to more than 30 lawyers—many of whom are women, who Mr. Cordell says can be particularly effective in representing men on such issues. About 97% of the firm's clients are men, although it does represent women—mostly, those referred by men the firm has successfully represented. Mr. Cordell says his lawyers represent female clients "zealously," but "because of our proclaimed commitment, not many women choose to come to us."

Tamar Faulhaber was a successful Atlanta family lawyer when she was recruited by Cordell & Cordell more than a year ago. The firm's offer of health

insurance and other benefits attracted her, but its male-focused Web site initially gave her pause: "I thought, 'What would make me do that?'" But after speaking to Mr. Cordell, she says, she became comfortable that the firm is committed to helping fathers stay involved in their children's lives. Plus, the firm's marketing machine means she can spend less time networking, and more time with her children.

Randy Kessler, an Atlanta family lawyer who has faced Cordell lawyers, says the firm's reputation could work against clients over time by making judges skeptical of its arguments: "It is much better to have a reputation for representing each client based on the facts of their case, regardless of their gender."

The firm can claim some notable victories. It secured visitation privileges for a man who, in the late 1990s, fled to Mexico with his children, later to be criminally charged for the flight. And then there is the case of Willie Gary, a Florida trial lawyer known for his suits against big corporations such as Coca-Cola Co., and for jetting around on "Wings of Justice II," a Boeing 737 customized with gold-plated sinks.

Working as co-counsel with another firm, Ms. Faulhaber in September slashed Mr. Gary's child-support obligations to the mother of twins he fathered out of wedlock to \$5,000 a month, from \$28,000.