



Finding meaning—and a career— after divorce

Once a stay-at-home mom, she emerged from the wreckage of her marriage with a mission: to help others start over and find happiness **BY ANDREA COOPER**

DEBBIE MARTINEZ

FROM: Stay-at-home
mother of two



TO: Divorce coach

In 2007, Debbie Martinez could have used a divorce coach. Her marriage was disintegrating, and she felt, she says, as if “a wave of black” were washing over her. The day after Christmas, she asked her husband, a doctor, to leave their Miami home. She says they agreed to meet a month later to discuss whether they had a future together, but when he phoned to break that date, she ended the call and made another—to a divorce attorney.

Formerly a behavioral specialist for kids who are severely emotionally disturbed, Martinez had been out of the workforce for a decade, caring for her own children, then 12 and 10, and living what she acknowledges was a comfortable life, with second homes at the beach and in the mountains. After the breakup, she was secure financially, thanks to savings, investments, alimony and child support, so she was able to continue as a full-time mom while she tried to recover from the sorrow, anger and sheer raw emotion of what had happened. “I just kind of put everything else on the back burner,” she says. »

A year later, Martinez felt ready for more. She wanted to find “not just a job but a purpose—something that would resonate with my soul.” One morning, a friend praised her for being a good listener and adviser and asked if she’d ever thought of life coaching. “I’m a spiritual, intuitive person,” Martinez says. “The intuitive part of me said, ‘This is it.’” She attended a holistic training program and at age 50 became a certified life coach. Her passion, she realized, was to help others facing the end of a marriage to move on.

Martinez had enough money to rent office space and run some ads, but she failed to generate many clients. Undaunted, she used some of her time to earn an additional certification, as a family mediator, accredited by the Florida Supreme Court. This credential allowed her to handle low-conflict divorces for couples who didn’t want to use an attorney. She also submitted a few sample articles about divorce to her local community newspaper. The publisher read them and told her, “I’m not going to run your articles. I’m going to give you a column.” The name recognition that resulted, along with steady advertising and positive word of mouth from past clients, turned her coaching into a viable business, with clients who are largely middle-class and wealthy professionals. Though she hasn’t yet earned a six-figure income, she forecasts she will by the end of the year.

“I’m not a divorce lawyer,” Martinez points out. “My job is to help clients identify where they are and where they want to be, then close the gap between the two.” That often involves giving advice on how to be a strong negotiator during settlement talks; strategizing with stay-at-home mothers about how to find fulfilling, paid careers; and offering tips to midlife professionals on how to handle online dating. She also helps with bureaucratic issues, such as dealing with the mountain of paperwork a divorce proceeding produces. Martinez aims to calm, encourage and inspire her clients, sometimes all in the same hour. What’s thrilling, she says, is “witnessing emotional, physical and spiritual changes in people who were convinced there was no way to move forward.”

Martinez coached one high-powered executive at a national company on what to expect if her soon-to-be ex sought alimony, as well as how to stay in contact and continue a loving relationship with her stepdaughter. For a client who is furious that her ex always shows up

late to pick up the kids on his weekends, Martinez offers help setting boundaries: “Tell him, calmly, that if he doesn’t arrive at the agreed-upon time, you will leave the kids at your mother’s house, and he will have to pick them up there.” The client took her advice, and her ex-husband began picking up the kids on time.

Martinez sometimes helps out pro bono. One woman came in disheveled and crying, unable to pay but willing to work hard to get unstuck. Martinez coached her for a year and a half, after which the client had the confidence to find a better job. Her coworkers threw her a going-away party, and as a farewell gift for Martinez, the client brought her one of the party photos to illustrate the progress she’d made: In the picture, she was 15 pounds lighter and wearing a new outfit.

Not every case is a success story. One newly divorced man, she remembers, was having trouble getting dates and wanted Martinez to tell him how to get women to sleep with him. To help him gain a little perspective, Martinez asked, “What qualities and behavior do you think would make a woman *want* to go to bed with you?” He said he had no idea and refused to spend time figuring it out. Nor did he want to talk about what had gone wrong in his marriage, why women didn’t want to date him or anything he might need to change in himself. “It’s not my job to tell him how to have more sex,” Martinez says, laughing and a little incredulous about one of the few clients she’s ever fired. “It’s my job to help him have a healthy relationship in which sex is a part.”

Some elements of her new career have been more fun. In June 2014 she hosted Miami’s first divorce party, inviting the public as well as past and current clients and their friends. Guests ate cupcakes topped with a ball and chain; the party favors were little coffins in which to bury regrets before moving on. A few guests brought their old wedding gowns to donate to charity.

In July, Martinez took her own advice about creating the best environment for a fresh start. With both of her kids now in college, she moved to Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, near Charleston, where her new professional offerings include speeches and workshops. After all, everyone deserves a new beginning. ©

ANDREA COOPER lives in North Carolina with her family and Ari the Havanese dog.

HOW WORK CAN MAKE YOU HAPPY

COACH KARMA

“I’m a firm believer that if you are doing things for the right reasons, to help people—if you’re doing it from the heart—then good things are going to start coming back.”

DEALING FROM THE DIVORCE DECK

“As a mom, I had so many dreams for my children and my family. A divorce shifts those dreams. The same dream, just a different shape.”



RUNNING THE NUMBERS

\$125

Martinez’s hourly rate for divorce coaching

6

Average number of sessions bought by each client

\$3,750

Current cost of the life-coach training Martinez received

100

Number of attendees at the divorce party Martinez hosted in Miami

70

Number of cupcakes topped with a ball and chain eaten by the partygoers

99

Number of advice columns and features Martinez has published on divorce