

THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

Divorce guidance, mediation available

CORONA: A new company will help couples negotiate the financial terms of their split at less cost than lawyers offer.

BY TIFFANY RAY
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A Canadian company offering storefront divorce mediation services has opened its first Inland franchise as part of an expansion to the U.S. market.

Fairway Divorce Solutions, founded in 2006 by Calgary stockbroker Karen Stewart, has opened an office in Corona that franchise owner Darin Johnston said provides a step-by-step process for negotiating divorce that alleviates client fears and is less costly than working through lawyers.

Johnston, a longtime business executive who said he went through a lengthy divorce of his own, was looking around for an entrepreneurial opportunity when a friend told him about Fairway. He opened the office in late January with one employee and said business is "ahead of where I was supposed to be at this time."

Stewart said she got the idea for Fairway after a grueling divorce she said dragged on for five years and cost her \$500,000. "I could fundamentally see some of the flaws that were happening in the traditional system," she said.

She started out offering divorce-related financial advice to clients as a side business of her brokerage firm. Two years later, she had developed the Fairway model, in which a negotiator works with each client individually to determine the best settlement for clients and their assets.

The first Fairway office opened in 2006, and the business spread quickly through Canada. The Corona office is the fifth in the U.S., although Stewart said she hopes to open 10 to 15 more U.S. locations by the end of the year.

Johnston said she chose to franchise the business rather than expand it in-house because she wanted to grow the business and its brand quickly, and she wanted to attract mediators who were entrepreneurs rather than employees. Stewart said franchisees must bring with them a strong financial background in business, accounting or law and experience in

negotiations. They also must train in mediation in accordance with their state's requirements.

The process does not eliminate lawyers entirely; Stewart said clients get a legal seminar as part of the process and are encouraged to take negotiated settlements to an attorney for review.

Although situations vary, Johnston said the fixed-fee process costs, on average, about \$4,000 per couple, and takes about three months.

Gloria Britt, a professional mediator in Riverside, said the Fairway franchise "sounds like a good thing," particularly these days, when people already are hurting financially.

"They need to find ways to get a divorce and not financially destroy each other in the process," she said.

Sometimes couples just need an objective mediator to help walk them through the process, Britt said. "It's all about having a new beginning. You're closing one door but you're going to be opening other doors."

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