

The ADVOCATE

The other side of divorce

By Christina Hennessy
Staff Writer

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Westport resident Jessica Bram wrote "Happily Ever After Divorce: Notes of a Joyful Journey" to help others going through the dissolution of their marriage. (Dru Nadler/Staff photo)

Jessica Bram reaches across the table and picks up the book that has been resting on a corner. As she fishes a pair of glasses out of her jacket pocket, she thumbs through to find the passage she wants to share.

"There is a moment in labor, when the baby is still a

long time from coming, but the contractions are so punishing and so excruciatingly cruel that you want to scream, "That's it! I'm done! I'm out of here!" she reads while sitting in her home office. "But there is absolutely no getting out of here, no backing out. Nowhere to go but forward into even crueller and more punishing waves of pain."

A mother of three boys, Bram uses the experience of childbirth in her new book, "Happily Ever After Divorce: Notes of a Joyful Journey," as one way to convey what her divorce from their father felt like at times. But the pain of ending her 19-year marriage was tempered by the joy she would eventually feel at the end of that long road.

An award-winning radio commentator, an essayist whose work has appeared in national and regional publications, and founder of the Westport Writers' Workshop, Bram says she has always found her strength and voice in personal writing. The book, her first, will be released this week.

"I found after looking back on all that had happened, there was this incredible, upbeat, positive message," Bram, 55, says. "Divorce is not the end of the world. In fact, it can be the beginning of real happiness."

Last year, about 10,700 divorces were reported in Connecticut, according to federal statistics. Beyond the numbers, Bram and others say divorce is a very personal and particular struggle that affects each family differently. Bram says she wanted to share her wisdom with others going through what is often a traumatic breakup.

"All those years I was in a troubled marriage, I was dead set against getting a divorce," she says. As a child of divorced parents, she says she was keenly aware of the effect it could have on her children. She feared psychological harm. She also was worried

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about the economic ramifications of dividing a household in two. And, she knew there was a stigma attached to divorce -- a sense that a "nice family," had somehow failed to keep it together.

"Those things kept me feeling very trapped for a very long time," she says.

And when she told people about her divorce, she says the naysayers were ever present, talking about the ill effects of broken homes. And while well-intentioned, she says the "I'm so sorry" she heard from many people only deepened her guilt. She says very few congratulated her on her decision.

"I am in no way trying to minimize the pain of divorce," or say it is the only way, she says. Instead, she hopes to express to others that there may be a better future for themselves, their children and their spouses if they have the courage to be honest with themselves.

"It was not always easy to expose so many personal things," she says. "But I kept in mind who I was writing this for."

She writes about moving to Westport from Westchester County, N.Y., more than 10 years ago, a newly divorced woman in her early 40s, attempting to carve out a new life for herself and her three sons.

Those going through a divorce often feel as though the proverbial bomb has been dropped, says Valerie Wallace, a social worker and co-leader of the divorce support group for women offered at the YWCA Greenwich. The angst often is driven by worries over what will happen to the children, the economic ramifications of the dissolution of the union, the fear of a move and the need to find a job and earn a living.

Wallace says the benefit of the group is to allow participants to realize they are not alone in their concerns.

"It is a lot about the 'in the same boat' mentality," she says. "There is a tremendous amount of bonding and affirmation that goes on with one another."

Wallace says a crucial issue is ensuring that children get the support and love they need.

"It as if the earth moves," she says, noting that even in the most amicable divorces, children can be deeply affected by their parents' separation.

Leslie Freedman, a psychologist who is director of the Stamford-based Center for Divorce Mediation and Family Services, says he always tells his clients, "You can dissolve your marriage, but you can't dissolve your family."

To help families create a post-divorce plan, he says he collaborates with the parents to develop a reliable, consistent and developmentally appropriate strategy. In addition, he says they work at maximizing the assets of the family for the benefit of the family as a whole.

Mediation isn't for everyone, he says, but it can be a viable alternative.

"The couples work through all these issues ... not without stress or emotion. But it is a better way to manage divorce when you are going to be part of each other's lives, as long as children are involved."

He says this collaborative approach can help children and their parents adjust to the new reality.

Bram says her childhood experiences made her particularly keen to help her children get through the transition as well-adjusted as possible.

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"The legacy of being a child in a painful divorce was a very, very valuable tool to help me fashion a life I wanted for them," she says.

She writes that she and her former husband worked hard to keep their children isolated from the often contentious aspects of the divorce. At every impasse, they would come back to what was best for their children.

It is, she writes, "the one thing, in my life at least, I can call an unqualified success. Our three boys grew up confident and secure in two different, peaceful loving homes. Never having had to choose between their parents, they have close, comfortable relationships with both their father and me."

As if to punctuate her belief that life continues and can grow richer, her life provided her with a perfect ending to her book: She is engaged and is planning to be married next year.

She writes in her epilogue that when all else fails and marital unhappiness is irreparable: "Divorce means taking that first constructive action, no matter how hard, expensive or demoralizing that can be, toward building a new future. Not just for oneself, but for one's children, as well. Because children deserve to live in a home of peace, loving feelings and tranquility."

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Jessica Bram, author of "Happily Ever after Divorce: Notes of a Joyful Journey," will have a book reading and signing Thursday at 7 p.m. at Barnes & Noble, 1076 Post Road E., Westport. Call 221-7955.

-- Staff Writer Christina Hennessy can be reached at Christina.hennessy@scni.com or 964-2241.

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