**Espousing Collaboration**

Coastal Collaborative Colleagues brings alternative divorce practices

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As co-founders of the nonprofit Coastal Collaborative Colleagues, ASHLEY DOYLE (*right*) and ASHLEY MICHAEL (*left*) recruited multi-faceted professionals to provide an alternative to the traditional means of navigating divorce and family legal issues.

Michaels, a family attorney, shares the inspiration behind the formation of Coastal Collaborative Colleagues.

“In 2012, I was trained in collaborative divorce,” says Michaels, “and collaborative law became my passion project. I knew I had to find other like-minded colleagues and professionals that could help our local families divorce in a better way.”

At that same training, she met co-founder Doyle, a financial planner. Soon thereafter, the two began to shape a collective vision. “After witnessing the financial and emotional toll divorce had taken on numerous clients,” says Doyle, “I was anxious to apply my financial planning certification to ease the divorce process.”

The very act of collaboration meant a paradigm shift away from one-on-one negotiations and toward a more interdisciplinary approach. “The only negative in collaborative law is that you can’t collaborate with oneself!” shares Michael. Similar to obtaining a mediator’s license, she explains, a collaborative attorney needs to grow different skills.

At CCC, legal services involve joint attorneys working with spouses or parents in family matters, and all parties sign a contract to stay out of court while working toward a legal plan to disentangle business, marriage, or family matters. While attorneys continue to guide the process, clients remain the decision-makers. Third-party professionals come on board to assist with finances, child matters, and therapeutic needs that arise throughout the process.

In addition to the local collaborative, Michael is also a founding board member of NC-CAN, the North Carolina Collaborative Attorney Network, a state practice group that educates the public about collaborative divorce.

The collaborative approach strives to do divorce differently, she says, by helping clients see the merits of working together toward a new normal.

“We provide a collective process to resolve differences through problem-solving skills and open and honest conversation,” she explains. It’s a healthier way to divorce, she adds, one that models respect, dignity, and problem-solving to a couple’s children.

Moving forward, CCC hopes to transform beliefs about the divorce process, steering clients away from the by and large adversarial dissolution of marriages and family ties. “People don’t understand that the parties don’t have to be friendly or like each other to have a collaborative divorce,” says Michael. They simply need to know that their counsel can collaborate—come together—on their behalf.

**“**It’s important for couples to understand that there’s a different approach,” says Doyle. “They can divorce and negotiate for themselves without leaving decisions up to the court system.”

Above all, as a steward of the collaborative mission, CCC espouses effective communication and respectful dissolution.

“That clears the path for interest-based problem solving and the power for the parties to control their future,” says Michael. “I believe you are more vulnerable in a collaborative session than in a courtroom, but the synergistic results the process can yield if the parties are willing to discuss settlement are immeasurable.”