

Picking up the pieces when families break up

Jon Tattrie for Metro Canada
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The breakup of a family is a painful, messy business, and it takes a certain kind of person to thrive as an "undertaker of the legal profession."

Terry Sheppard, of Boyne Clark Family Law in Halifax, was drawn to the grim work because it gives him a chance to help people in hard times.

"Short of the loss of a loved one, this will be the most difficult things you go through in your life," he said. Guiding people to the other side is what keeps him coming into work every day.

He finds satisfaction when the children have settled into the new arrangement, the house and finances are taken care of, and life can restart. "You see (clients) take a deep sigh of relief that they survived it."

Sheppard also likes sticking up for the little guy when a high-powered, income-earning spouse divorces a stay-at-home parent who's uncomfortable fighting in court. Sheppard gets to level the playing field.

"You've got to be able to deal with conflict and difficult people. If you want everything to be happy and rosy and sunshine, this job will eat you up."

He's focused on family law for a decade and says compartmentalizing life is critical to survival as a divorce lawyer.

"It's hard not to take it home with you but you can't, or you'll never be able to function."

Andrew Feldstein of Toronto's Andrew Feldstein & Associates agrees.

"You see people at one of their absolute worst times in life, but in other times you are able to give them tremendous success and opportunity in life," the attorney said.

Winning back custody for a parent who had lost it gives him a "feeling of accomplishment that I think is difficult to beat in any other area of law."

Being objective is necessary, Feldstein explained. He's dealt with people who catch their partner cheating after 20 years of marriage and find themselves being sued for spousal support.

"They think that's ridiculous, but you sometimes have to educate them and say, 'Well, you do have to pay spousal support.'"

The same goes for custody of children. The law might not always seem fair to his clients, but it's part of his job to give them a clear outline of their chances.

"You have to be able to be a tough negotiator, but also be compassionate toward your client. You have to realize that if you want to get people to a reasonable compromise, you need to be reasonable. You need to know when to fight and when not to fight," Feldstein said.



Helping a family live a normal life after a divorce breaks them apart can be satisfying according to one divorce lawyer.