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PEOPLE AND PERSONALITIES



SANDRA MILLER PHOTO

Winthrop attorney Edward Amaral, pictured above with his dog Luciano, talks about his new office in the North End, the good news/bad news scenario that results from plummeting divorce rates, and the benefits of mediation. **Feature, Page 9**

Master mediator

Amaral says divorce rates are declining as couples wait out the economy — and endure a lot of tension

By SANDRA MILLER
For the Transcript

The good news is that with the economy the way it is, divorce rates are down. The bad news is, it's only because battling couples are just waiting for 401K and real estate values to rise before divvying them up, says a local attorney.

"Divorce is down 27 percent," said Attorney Edward Amaral, who had been practicing for years in Winthrop and opened up a second office this fall in the North End. "They're just prolonging their divorce," which means prolonging tension in the home, and if there are children involved, that's not good. "Everyone knows what's in the best interest of their children."

Attorney Amaral handles a lot of divorce cases, but he tends to do more divorce mediation, which is a less expensive and less contentious way to go, he said.

Plus, his "associate," Luciano, his cream-colored French bulldog, has a way of warming up clients so they act more civil toward each other, said Amaral, who said, "He's the best mediator we have." With Luciano's big floppy ears and his unabashed love of being patted, Amaral is probably not exaggerating.

Amaral, who is single, admits to being a softie when it comes to marriage. He knows he's biting the hand that feeds him - the divorce industry - by saying, "I'm actually anti-divorce." He thinks many people can work things out if they tried a little harder. However, he also knows that divorce is also sometimes the best thing for doomed marriages. "Any psychologist or psychiatrist or therapist will say once the air is cleansed, there's no reason why you can't be best friends," he said.

Amaral grew up in Worcester, the only lawyer in his family. His father's a retired surgeon, his mom was a travel agent who died of cancer in 1994. His brother's a colonel in the US Army stationed in Washington, D.C., and his sister manages a restaurant in Saratoga, NY.

He has wanted to be a lawyer ever

since his third grade teacher Miss Avakian at the Thorndike Elementary in Worcester gave him the idea. "She told me I had a big mouth that reminded her of a Philadelphia attorney. It stuck with me," he said.

He studied law at Suffolk University, and tried to invite his old third-grade teacher to his graduation ceremony in 1992, only to meet disappointment. "She was nowhere to be found," he recalled.

Amaral worked for the Bronx District Attorney's Office as an assistant district attorney and opened up his own law practice at 92 State Street in Boston in 1994. However, he said the Big Dig scared away a lot of clients. "It was a nightmare. I think people don't like to go into the city and look for parking," he added.

He was living in Winthrop's Seal Harbor at the time, so he decided to renovate a building on Revere Street in Winthrop 11 years ago.

Three years ago, he moved his home to the Prince building on Atlantic Avenue, which he swears has a view of his old Seal Harbor home. North Enders may have noticed the handsome, unmarried lawyer walking around the neighborhood with Luciano. Amaral, whose last name is Portuguese, is also of Italian and Greek descent, so he's happy to be working in the North End again. In 1986, Amaral worked as a paralegal for Campbell and Associates, a law firm above the former Michael's restaurant at 83 Atlantic Avenue, which was next store to his new office. He fondly recalls grabbing sandwiches at the old Scola's sub shop.

Amaral decided to open up the North End office as a convenience to those area residents who also use the Winthrop office but work in town. Unlike the fancy State Street address, he said, "We've been busy since the day we opened."

He meets clients everywhere - at the Beacon Hill Athletic Club down the street, at the Sports Club LA gym, where he also goes, and he even gets referrals from his competitors' clients. "They say, 'I wish I had him working for me,' and they tell their friends. It's

all word of mouth."

Amaral is also seeing more bankruptcy and debt restructuring cases coming in because of the economy. Unfortunately, with a lot of lawyers who don't have a lot of work, he's also seeing many cases that don't have much merit coming into court.

Amaral is a member of the Massachusetts Bar Association, Massachusetts Academy of Trial Attorneys, and The Offshore Institute. He is also an affiliate partner with the law firm of Engel and Reiman, P.C., whose principal attorney, Barry Engel, "is considered one of if not the top asset protection and offshore trust attorneys in the world," said Amaral.

His eight-member law firm practices general law in the areas of family law, real estate, estate planning, asset protection, business law, immigration and personal injury. His staff includes paralegal Mal Jones, legal assistant Lindsey McClarey, and Attorney Joe Vecchio, all of Winthrop. There are two lawyers in each office, and four support staff.

He's also considering expanding his divorce mediation practice to other areas around the state, but for now, he's doing a balancing act with keeping busy and trying to keep his clients in check.

"The economy is affecting everyone," said Amaral, who noted having to remind a few clients to pay on time so he can meet his payroll. Otherwise, for his line of work, with his experience, he said, "We've been lucky; we're recession-proof. We're very good at what we do. We're at the top of our game."

That's why he tries to steer his clients toward divorce mediation instead of a costly court battle. "Most divorces can be settled for \$1,250 each," said Amaral, who said he has represented many high-net-worth clients with divorces, support and custody matters. "Divorce can cost \$30,000-\$50,000, when they could just settle in 10 hours or less. It's such a big waste of money. People can at least call a divorce mediator by phone for free consultation."