

Counselor-at-Law Christopher R. Barbrack, Esq. Emphasizes Collaborative Divorce Law

Helping people, whether in his role as psychologist or lawyer, is the mission of Christopher R. Barbrack, Esq. He has been doing this since his graduation from Iona College with a BA in psychology, an MA and ABD from Columbia University, and a PhD from Indiana University.

IT'S NEW To Us

After studying and working in Indiana, Florida, and Tennessee, Mr. Barbrack settled in Princeton in 1981. He established a practice as a clinical psychologist, and was also a tenured associate professor at Rutgers Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology, where he lectured, and wrote on topics of psychotherapy, clinical supervision, and statistics/experimental design.

In addition, he served as a clinical psychologist at the Carrier Clinic in Belle Mead, as well as at the Princeton Center for Neuropsychological Evaluation and Rehabilitation, where he saw a wide variety of outpatients for assessment and psychotherapy.

Mr. Barbrack also spent time in the Union County Public Defender's office in Elizabeth, conducting psychological and neuropsychological examinations of defendants charged with capital crimes.

Process of the Law

"I enjoyed my practice in clinical psychology, and I loved teaching at Rutgers," he says. In 1986, however, he decided to leave his psychology practice and go to law school. Switching gears,

but not focus, he earned a JD degree from the University of Pennsylvania, and is licensed to practice law in New Jersey and New York.

"My wife is a lawyer, and I liked the process of the law. For a lawyer, the results are very obvious. You get an answer. You win or lose a case. You get the divorce settlement."

"My life presents me with several challenges to think about and spend time and energy on," he explains. "One, to help those who are least able to help themselves, which in my case are children trapped in divorcing families where the parents are swamped by emotional turmoil. I should add to this my work with undocumented immigrants. Two, to continue to study. As professionals mature, they can coast on what they already know. This is comfortable for them, but makes me uncomfortable. Three, to continue to hone my listening skills. I worked on this as a psychologist and do so as an attorney."

After graduation in 1989, and passing the bar in New Jersey and New York, Mr. Barbrack worked as a solo practitioner in general law with emphasis on family law. He later served as a trial lawyer as the plaintiff's attorney in medical malpractice cases.

Welfare of Others

His concern for the welfare of others drew him to consider another aspect of the law, especially in regard to divorce cases. As he explains, "Traditionally, a divorce lawyer represents a client, and the bill goes up and up and up. You bring in experts, and a case can go on for years, ultimately going to court. This bothered me. For more than 20 years, I have been a critic of us-

ing psychologists in helping courts make decisions about children in divorce. There should be more of a widespread awareness that the field of clinical psychology has almost nothing to offer the child custody decision-making process — at least there is no good science to verify it."

These reservations about traditional divorce law led him to a new way of managing these cases. "I went into collaborative law, which is a new approach. In collaborative law, you get people together. Each client has a lawyer, and they all sit together in the same room. Before we start, everyone signs a pledge that says we will never go to court. We want to achieve a solution before it gets to that. Also, the first thing we say is 'Are you sure you want to do this? Is there no way to save the marriage?' If not, then we are committed to achieving an amicable solution."

Mr. Barbrack says that it can take as little as six months to reach a settlement, with sessions lasting from one to three hours.

If the services of an expert in a particular field are needed, the collaborative law approach is to rely on just one, he points out. "We will rely on that one person, and everyone agrees to this. One of the major attractions for me about collaborative divorce law is that it moves the psychologist from conducting always costly and sometimes damaging child custody evaluations to a place where the psychologist can participate in the collaborative process and work directly on helping families through the divorce and setting the stage for a good aftermath.

Emotional Issues

"Also," he continues, "if

there are emotional issues involved, such as a spouse leaving the marriage for another person, a coach or mental health therapist can be brought in. If a client is so upset and angry, they may need help to find a way to get past it in order to move on.

"The idea is to get people to focus on their needs and goals, and always, when children are involved, to think of what will be best for them. The parents have to separate their own issues and problems and concentrate on the children's needs. It is very important for the children to have a stable, secure home during and after a divorce. Both for them and the society. We want them to grow up to be productive citizens."

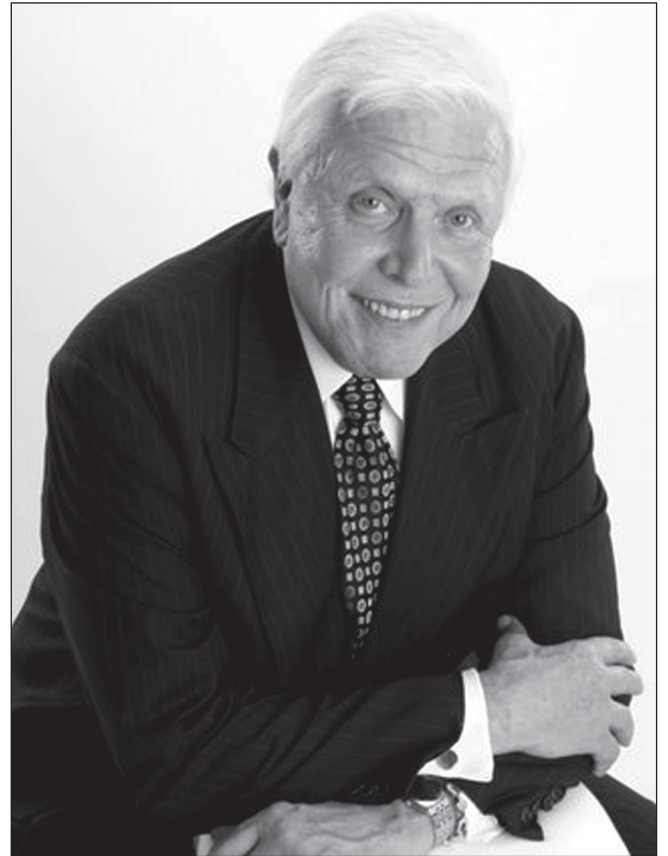
Mr. Barbrack adds that in some cases, such as those involving domestic or child abuse, collaborative law may not be effective.

Overall, however, it is a smoother, less contentious process, reducing the amount of dissension and bitterness. Custody arrangements are worked out for children — and even pets — with the least amount of difficulty and dissatisfaction.

Immigration Law

"Over the years, both as a psychologist and a lawyer, I have learned that you never know the trouble people are dealing with," points out Mr. Barbrack. "Some people are really heroes handling all they are going through."

He also devotes part of his practice to immigration law, and he serves on the Advisory Board of the Latin American Legal Defense Fund in Trenton. "I am very moved by the undocumented immigrants in Princeton, and other lawyers and I are helping them with the application process for the Deferred Action Program. This is for those people who have been in the United States for at least five years since the



PERFECT FIT: "Working in divorce law was a perfect fit for my background in the mental health field. Now, I am involved in collaborative law, which is an enlightened new approach to divorce." Christopher R. Barbrack, Esq., has also received numerous degrees, including a PhD in psychology, served as a tenured professor at Rutgers Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology, and had a practice in clinical psychology in Princeton before attending law school.

age of 16 or younger. It is aimed at keeping them from being sent back to their native country."

During his time as a psychologist, and now as a lawyer, Mr. Barbrack has written more than 100 articles, book chapters, professional presentations, and technical reports in law and psychology. He has served on the subcommittee on regulations of the New Jersey Board of Psychological Examiners, and has been a frequent lecturer at the New Jersey Institute for Continuing Education. He has also participated in numerous workshops and conventions.

A fan of Princeton, Mr. Barbrack looks forward to continuing his practice here. "Princeton is a diverse com-

munity in almost every way and is home to many very interesting and accomplished people.

"The famous psychoanalyst Eric Ericson wrote about the development of people from birth to old age. The challenges of my developmental stage involve finding meaning in everyday life and continuing to be a 'player' on whatever stage I find myself. Fortunately, I much prefer work to vacations so I have plenty of opportunities for fulfillment."

Mr. Barbrack's hours are by appointment, including evenings and weekends. (609) 497-1111. Website: www.barbrack.com.

—Jean Stratton