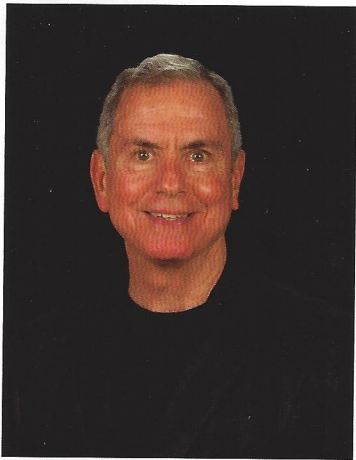




Featuring Sheldon Finman
by Sara Fitzpatrick Comito



Sheldon Finman

Supervised visitation: no parent wants things to end up like that. However he or she ends up in this reality – criminal history, drug abuse, domestic violence, or extreme conflict between parents – Sheldon Finman wants people to recalibrate their thinking when it comes to supervised visitation. The family law attorney, whose firm’s motto is “Divorce does not mean the end of your family,” is also president of the board at The Family Resource Center of

Southwest Florida, which provides supervision and a safe place for children to have access to his or her noncustodial parent.

And he is armed with a statistic that even he finds surprising, given the often polarizing effect of court-ordered supervision: Out of all the families that come to the Family Resource Center, approximately 50 percent successfully reunite. That’s not to say the parents decide to tear up their divorce papers. Rather, they become able over time to cultivate the motivation and develop the strategies to be more effective and harmonious co-parents. “That’s significant, if not startling, to me,” Finman said. “I’ve been an attorney for 42 years. The cases are all court-ordered, the vast majority are coerced or compelled, and court-ordered over objections.”

Having a full half of the parents in such alienating circumstances move on and be able to have unsupervised visits is the type of built-in obsolescence the FRC wishes to achieve.

“The FRC is the only agency that accepts court referrals for divorce and paternity and post-divorce cases,” he explained, adding there are private practitioners who offer visitation supervision, but “there’s no other public agency that provides this service.”

Its resources are limited. All families using the service are charged \$50 per hour, plus a small signup fee. Space is donated by the Children’s Advocacy Center on Evans Avenue on the weekends. The FRC, which Finman describes as “a growing, fledgling organization,” has an executive director, Tina Friedman, who is the only paid staff member, earning a nominal salary. It doesn’t have a community advisory board. There’s no fundraising director.

There are some assets, however, that would be the envy of any non-profit. “The board is a true village,” said Finman. “It’s quite

incredible – the amount of dedication by the board members to keep this entity going.” Deborah Coe Silver of Silver Psychology Center is secretary, to whom Finman credits much of the organization’s success and staying power. “She’s the heart and soul of the FRC,” he beamed.

Judge Lee Schreiber is an emeritus board member, a long-time champion of children whom Finman said can be counted upon to be generous with her time and advice, and has supported the organization since its inception in 2006. Other familiar faces include Vice President Darryl Bauchert, a Certified Family Mediator, and local attorneys Christy O’Brien and Beth Ann Maliszewski. Last but certainly not least are the community volunteers who give freely of their time, of which there are precious few. “We are very much in need of volunteers to do supervision,” affirmed Finman.

The main source of funding for the FRC is a live and silent auction hosted at the Association of Family Law Professionals’ Annual Conference. At this year’s all-day conference, held Oct. 11 at the Colonial Preserve County Club, the FRC netted nearly \$8,000, up from just under \$7,000 last year. While it’s a fun event with popular items to bid on, Finman said the organization wants to do so much more, to apply for grants and be financially independent, and offer a greater array of services.

At this year’s AFLP conference, the FRC also gave out its first award, The Deborah Coe Silver Pinnacle Award, to its namesake, which will be presented every year to “an individual whose dedication is just over the top,” as Finman put it.

“We are saving a lot of families,” he said, but there’s much more to do. Volunteers are needed, especially to sign on for a four-hour block of supervising responsibility on weekends. To find out more about how to help, contact Shelly Finman at shelly@finmanlaw.com.

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