

A do-it-yourself courtroom

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One by one, they come to the windows of the Sacramento family court's self-help center, seeking assistance with their divorce, custody and child-support cases.

The center receives about 50,000 pleas for help each year from those representing themselves in family court. Staff members try to help them help themselves.

It is like a nonstop country song, filled with heartache and sorrow.

There is the downcast young man in a white shirt and blue tie, whose wife is divorcing him after a year of marriage. They have a 1-year-old baby.

"This wasn't my choice," he said, sighing. "I wanted to work it out. Our pastor called her, and she hung up on him."

There is the young woman wearing shorts and a baseball cap, who married a year ago and decided she'd had enough. "And then I kicked him out," she said.

Lawyers wanted thousands of dollars to handle their divorces.

Instead, these people chose to spend long hours standing in lines and filling out forms in a process that can take months.

They are among the throng in family court who decide to go it alone, without a lawyer.

Throughout California and the United States, those dealing with the most emotional of cases, including an increasing number of middle-class litigants, try to navigate their way through the complex world of family law.

It is part of an ongoing national shift in how civil cases are handled, says Richard Zorza, a Harvard-trained lawyer who is one of the nation's top experts on self-represented litigants.

"We had this model for generations of what a court looked like with lawyers, and now they're not there," he said.

Legal institutions must adapt to the new reality, he said, and California's courts are at the forefront of change.

In Sacramento's family court, more than 70 percent of litigants represent themselves in thousands of cases every year. The figure tops 80 percent in some counties.

Many go it alone because they want to save money. For many low-income residents, however, hiring a lawyer is not an option. And with few exceptions, there is no free legal aid for those in family court.

California Chief Justice Ronald George has made the situation a top priority.

"It's become the major challenge facing the judiciary in the next decade," he said.

People representing themselves clog the courts and jeopardize their own legal rights in divorce, custody and child-support cases, he said.

To address the problem, California's courts host an extensive self-help Web site, www.legalselfhelp.ca.gov.

They also have allocated \$8.7 million to fund a self-help center in every county, said Bonnie Hough, the state court system's self-help director.

Many counties already have some type of self-help center, but Sacramento's is one of the best, Hough said.

The Sacramento family court is in a massive structure on Power Inn Road called the William R. Ridgeway Family Relations Courthouse.

Just inside the first-floor lobby, the self-help center is directed by Lollie Roberts, a family law attorney who approaches her job with passion and intelligence.

Roberts became committed to self-help while handling her own custody case before going to law school, when self-help centers didn't exist.

She said she went broke paying a lawyer and then took on her own case to win custody of her young daughter. The experience provided her life's calling.

"I wanted to help all these people who couldn't afford an attorney and were trying to work through the system," she said.

The center assists litigants regardless of income. It is blessed with a spacious facility and trained staff.

A separate on-site service provides assistance with housing, employment and child services.

Workshops offer help filing for divorce, dividing assets and seeking court orders for custody and child support.

Translators are available in dozens of languages, from Russian to Urdu to Vietnamese.

"We really do have the model program here," Roberts said. "People can get all their help in one place. We try to make it as seamless as possible."

Upstairs in the courtrooms, parties without lawyers argue their cases before the judges.

On a recent day, Supervising Judge Jerilyn Borack heard a series of cases, some involving allegations of domestic violence.

Most times there was not a lawyer in the courtroom, aside from the judge.

Some of the litigants were well dressed and well behaved, and had done their homework.

One woman, an urban planner dressed in a stylish sweater and slacks, sought a permanent restraining order against the father of her two young children.

Speaking in lawyerly tones, Xzandrea Fowler, 27, told the judge her former fiancé had come to her house at odd hours and banged on the windows. She called the police.

The father, also college-educated, wore a suit and defended himself. He said he was only making sure his children were safe, after his daughter wasn't at school when he went to pick her up.

"I didn't do anything but find out about the children," Michael Vaughn Jr. said. "I'm a good father."

The judge imposed a temporary restraining order and told the father to obey its terms. Then she sent the former couple to court mediation.

"The two of you are not in the same place, mentally, with the relationship," Borack told them.

In the hallway after court, Fowler said she had been handling her case without a lawyer since police first told her how to seek a restraining order.

But the days she had to take off work and the hours she put into the case made her question her decision not to hire an attorney.

"I heard you could file yourself, and thought I'd give it a try," she said.

"I wouldn't do it again."

Some litigants can hardly speak before the judge. Others ramble, cry or fight.

Borack, a former middle-school teacher, controls them through the tone in her voice and the look in her eye. She asks them questions and hands down orders with tones that are sometimes kind, sometimes stern.

Borack said she enjoys the challenge of working with self-represented litigants, known in legal circles as "pro pers."

"With pro pers it's so intensely intimate," she said. "It's them and you."

One young woman said her boyfriend is a methamphetamine user who beat her and set her hair on fire when he knocked a cigarette out of her hand.

The woman said she didn't want him near her or her child.

Another young woman, who was pregnant, wanted a restraining order against her boyfriend, who she said assaulted her.

Wearing a tank top, her long red hair still wet, she stood before the judge and argued her case in a barely audible whisper.

Neither of the boyfriends came to court.

In another case, a father and his sons' maternal grandparents argued over visitation.

The father, a burly, suntanned man with dirty blond hair, accused the grandfather, lanky and wearing cowboy boots, of molesting the boys.

The grandfather called it a lie and pushed back his chair. When the two men started to argue, the bailiff stepped in and told them to stop.

Borack sends many from her courtroom back downstairs to the self-help center.

Michael Lopez, 32, is a paralegal who staffs the center's windows.

He handled his own difficult custody case when he was younger, after running out of money for lawyers.

"Two attorneys and \$20,000 later, I still didn't have custody of my son," he said.

But representing himself, he eventually won his legal fight.

"You have to be like a Jedi knight," he said.

"Once you get focused and distance yourself emotionally, you can see things more clearly. You learn the process, and you can do it."