



Sistering

Women Helping Each Other Survive and Even Thrive After Divorce

LISA LESLIE HENDERSON **writer**

local organization Jane Does Well specializes in “sistering.” The verb “sistering” originated in the construction industry and refers to the process by which a joist—a wooden or steel beam that typically supports a floor or ceiling—is strengthened. By attaching a new piece of frame to the original joist, builders can double the joist’s capacity, enabling it to withstand a heavier load. Similarly, Jane Does Well uses sistering to strengthen women going through the divorce process. The positive support provided by its community of women who have been there, combined with its vetted network of trusted divorce professionals and regular events and communications, enables women to thrive, not just survive, divorce.

“Divorce is one of the most traumatic experiences anyone can go through,” explains Christina Pavlina, co-founder of Jane Does Well. Pavlina speaks from experience. When she found herself in the divorce process five years ago, she felt as if she was living a nightmare. “I was completely undone—I didn’t know how I would get through the next hour, much less the whole day.”

Divorce ushers in a time of intense emotional and financial upheaval that can leave even the most together woman feeling undone. As relationships change, the loss is often overwhelming. Imagine that your spouse, the partner with whom you thought you would share a lifetime of dreams and experiences, is no longer there for you. Perhaps someone else has already replaced you. Or maybe there is someone new in your life. Whatever the case, it’s a





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Christina Pavlina / co-founder of Jane Does Well

major change in plans where the impact extends far beyond the two of you. Your children are hurt by the seismic shake-up of their world and rather than being able to protect them from it, you are a party to it. The family that you have nurtured is no longer together; many nights you are not able to put your children to bed or see them off to school in the morning. Holidays can be difficult as you find yourself left out of the "family" celebrations that you used to organize. Friends often disappear or take sides and sometimes your own family is hurt and doesn't understand or know how to support you. Your financial future is uncertain as you contemplate dividing assets and funding two households. A profound sense of isolation stems from the realization that your future, and perhaps that of your children, is entirely up to you.

However, devastation does not have to be the end of the story—it certainly has not been for Pavlina. "Divorce presents an opportunity for profound personal transformation," Pavlina explains. "It is an invi-

"Sistering led me on the path to the light at the end of the tunnel."

Sue Kisiday / co-founder of Jane Does Well

tation to discover the depth of your strength and courage—to create a highly satisfying and authentic life for yourself, and be proud of YOU."

Let's be clear, Pavlina is not promoting divorce. "If you can salvage your marriage, do it," Pavlina says. "Think about it very carefully and give yourselves time. If you decide divorce is the right choice, then know it

will be much harder if you try to go it alone." You need sistering.

"A girlfriend of mine took my hand and continuously reassured me that we were going to go through my divorce *together*," Paulina recalls. "She got me out of bed some mornings, went with me to see my lawyer, and helped me manage the constant flow of ups and downs until I could stand on my own feet. Having been through divorce herself, she was daily proof that I would eventually feel whole again."

Convinced of the power of sistering, Pavlina began to reach out to other women in Wellesley and Weston who were divorcing to offer her support. One of them was her friend and neighbor, Sue Kisiday, who took a year to return her phone calls. "Denial is a powerful thing," Kisiday explains.

Sistering proved to be healing balm for both. "Sistering led me on the path to the light at the end of the tunnel," Kisiday explains. "I highly recommend seeking sistering early in the process—it's both comforting and inspiring to learn from someone who has come through the process and is on the other side. It helped me understand what was ahead and how to best prepare myself."

Similarly, Pavlina offers, "There is no better feeling than to make a difference in a woman's life when she is undergoing divorce. I appre-

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"While divorce may bring an end to the life they have known, it can also be the beginning of something wonderful."

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ciate and admire these women because the waters are choppy and not easy to navigate. By providing friendship and support where needed, I feel I have turned my own negative experience into something positive."

This past year the duo formalized the sistering process by creating Jane Does Well, a digital and physical community of divorced or divorcing women in Greater Boston. Today more than 60 women comprise this healing community. Every month members are invited to participate in multiple social and educational events where they can connect with others and learn. Weekly communications provide insight and inspiration, and "Jane's List" offers names of vetted local divorce professionals. Soon women will be

MEDIA BAKERY

The Who, What, and Why of Divorce

Some Divorce Facts

■ **AFTER MORE THAN A CENTURY** of rising divorce rates, during the last 30 years rates have been declining. If current trends continue, Justin Wolfers, a University of Michigan economist, estimates that nearly two-thirds of marriages will not end in divorce.

■ **ABOUT 25 PERCENT** of all divorces in the United States are between couples over the age of 50. According to a study conducted by the American Association of Retired Persons, the top causes for women-initiated divorces were physical or emotional abuse, infidelity, or drug or alcohol addiction. For men, the most common reasons stated included falling out of love or believing that they had different values or lifestyle wishes than their spouses. Motivated by a concern that they would lose touch with their children in a divorce, men were more likely to prolong a difficult marriage than women.

■ **DIVORCE CAN BE DEVASTATING** at any age. However, when it happens later in life, it can have a profound financial impact on a woman and negatively affect her ability to retire," explains certified divorce financial analyst and Weston-resident Gabrielle Clemens who specializes in working with divorcing individuals. "By developing a comprehensive understanding of her individual and marital assets, liabilities, and financial needs, a woman can empower herself to make smart and sustainable short- and long-term financial decisions. To be successful, she needs to create and follow a realistic budget and financial plan. With proper planning, she can face the future with confidence." In the end, Clemens cautions, "marriage is about love; divorce is about money."

able to ask and answers each other's questions virtually through JaneDoesWell.org.

"We try to offer events, experiences, and information that will help women at each stage of the divorce process, from the initial request, through the legal process itself, and on to life beyond," Kisiday explains.



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One new member recalls how comforted she felt by the women at the first Jane Does Well dinner she attended, “When my husband announced that he wanted a divorce, I was completely blindsided,” she recalls. “Several women sat with me at dinner that night and listened to my story. Although I cried all the way home about being eligible for this group, I held on to their reassurances that I would be okay—and their phone numbers!”

Educational events including group discussions with local divorce attorneys and financial planners have helped new members understand what the divorce process entails and the types of professionals who make sense for their “divorce team.” Women who have been around for a while continue to find value in these evenings. “We can always use free advice from a divorce attorney,” Pavlina chuckles. Other events on the calendar include an evening with an online dating specialist, an expert on spiritual nourishment during change and adversity, and a leader in mindfulness meditation.

Growth in Jane Does Well has been organic—a friend mentions Jane Does Well to another friend who is in need. Women come from many different communities, and represent a variety of professions and circumstances. Some, having initiated their divorce, are plaintiffs in their case; others are defendants. Members span life stages, although the majority of women are approaching mid-life. Some are even remarried!

“Women remain in our community, even when they remarry,” Pavlina says. “They have made great friends and love to help others. Plus we have a great time together. My married friend refers to this group as my fun friends!”

Why did Pavlina and Kisiday choose the name Jane Does Well for the community? “Jane” is a nod to the pseudonym Jane Doe and acknowledges that divorce can happen to anyone. “Does well,” reflects the most frequent question women ask at the onset of divorce: Will I be okay?

“We wanted to reassure women, in our name and in the experiences that we offer, that life doesn’t end with divorce,” Kisiday explains. “While divorce may bring an end to the life they have known, it can also be the beginning of something wonderful.” **WW**

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