THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER • MONDAY, DEC. 22, 2008

JOB LOSSES AND DECLINING HOME EQUITY ARE KEEPING SOME UNHAPPY COUPLES TOGETHER.

One effect of the faltering economy is that more people are putting off getting divorced. DeeDee, with her son, is one of them.

MINDY SCHAUER, THE GRANGE COUNTY REGISTER

DELAYING DIVORCE

By GREG HARDESTY

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

isa Hughes, one of Orange County's most promi-nent divorce attorneys, has seen her fair share of dramatics over the three-plus decades she's been

oramatics over the turee-plus decades are a seen practicing.

Six of her clients and a divorce attorney at another firm have been murdered – victims of the often combustible nature of family-law litigation.

Beyond these tragic blowups, Hughes has seen and

heard it all.

Until recently.

"I know two lawyers with 20-plus years of experience who've called me recently asking for work," says Hughes,

founder of Hughes & Sullivan in Tustin. "That's never happened before."

In a sign of the dismal economic times, more middle-class to upper-earning couples are delaying filing for dissolution of their marriages, choosing instead to simmer under the same roof as they ride out the recession. "The buzz on the street is that divorce filings are off as much as 30 percent at some law firms," Hughes says.

David Wald has been practicing family law in Irvine for 35 years.

35 years.
"I've seen a steady number of initial consultations ... but typically the individual ends up saying, I think I'll stick it

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DIVORCE: An economic cost

out; there's not enough money to go through with it,' "he says. After all, divorces aren't

cheap.
Retainers for attorneys cost \$5,000 to \$10,000 and beyond. Throw in moving and other expenses, and it's enough to make unhap-py couples think twice about calling it quits - no matter how bad their mar-

riage.
Take, for example, Dee-Dee, a Mission Viejo wom-an who did not want her full ame used, to protect her

Perhaps it was an omen, she says, when her hus-band lost his wedding band on their honeymoon in

Now, nine years later, she says their marriage is not working out.

DeeDee wants a divorce. Problem is, she can't afford

"I don't want to ruin ourselves financially,"

says. She says she and her husband are being forced to hold off on filing as they share a home that has lost most of its equity - either that, or risk losing a life-style to which they have be-

come accustomed.
"I have spoken with specialists and attorneys but always stop in my tracks because of the financial hit I will take," DeeDee says. "I'm not only thinking of how I am going to support myself, but my 8-year-old

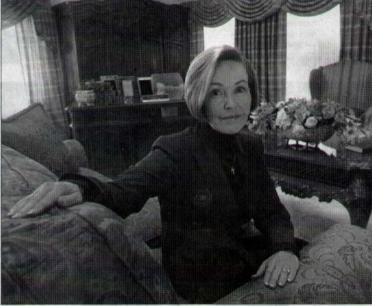
So DeeDee, 43, is settling in for a long stretch on her living-room couch.

THE NUMBERS

The wealthy tend to file for divorce regardless of the state of the economy, as do folks who can't afford le-gal representation, Hughes gal representation, Hughes and other family law attor-

The falloff in divorce filings, they say, is happening in the middle, to folks like DeeDee and her husband.

Orange County Superior Court statistics show a recent downturn in divorce filings, but nothing dra-



ANA VENEGAS, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Lisa Hughes is an Orange County attorney who sees a downturn in the number of middle-class couples getting a di-vorce because they can't afford the legal fees and economic fallout.

Francisco Firmat, supervising judge of the family law panel at the Lamoreaux Justice Center in Orange.

That number is down 100 filings from the year before, and down about 450 from fiscal year 2004-05.

This year, based on fil-ings to date, the number of divorce filings is projected to total 11,431, which would

be an increase of 93 filings.

The numbers don't tell
the whole story, Hughes

says.

The projected slight increase is being driven, to a large degree, by the number of "pro per" filings, she says - people who represent themselves in court. And the rich continue to call it quits in the usual numbers, keeping the fil-

ings flowing, she says.

The county doesn't break down divorce filings by category, but some num-bers have remained consis-tent: The divorce rate is 51 In the fiscal year ended
June 30, Orange County
Had II,338 fillings for dissolution of marriage, said

Lett. He divorce rate is 31
percent; the average length
of a marriage is seven
years; and the state considterm" marriage.

Golden anniversary? Most folks don't make it

past copper.

Despite what the official numbers say, Hughes has no doubt that there are far fewer middle-class folks filing for divorce in the poor economy.

economy.

Sitting in her plush but homey office, which has a sophisticated surveillance system, the veteran of Orange County divorce wars laid out the landscape:

"Intuitively, and as previ-ous recessions have shown, when the economy goes down, divorces go up,"

Hughes says.

"With a big Mercedes, flashy clothes and a membership to a country club, a count person can overlook a lot. When things go bad financially, now you have to de-cide if you like each other. And that's why, typically, divorce filings go up when the economy goes down. "But what's happening

now is different."

That difference, Hughes says, boils down to the collapse of the housing mar-

"Most couples are without equity (in their homes)," says Hughes, who will celebrate 30 years of marriage on Christmas Eve with husband Bruce, a partner in her law firm. "And if one of them has lost a job, there's not enough

cash to support a family.
"It's creating a difficult set of dynamics. And the dynamics are, 'I can't af-ford to get a divorce.' "

LOOKING AHEAD

DeeDee tries to have

DeeDee tries to nave a sense of humor about her situation.

She knows things could be a lot worse, and is grateful that she and her husband are working together "I take full responsibility on the standard working together". situation.
She knows things could ful that she and her hus-band are working together in their son's best interest.

She's concerned about her son's future - not whether she can splurge on a new pair of pumps. For example, she would love to keep her son in private school.

She says she would rather not come home to her husband in their 2,000square-foot, four-bedroom She wonders: Is this any

way to live?

For now, at least, it appears DeeDee has no

Still running, with her husband, an estate and financial planning business, DeeDee has looked around for possible new jobs.

The college graduate and easoned entrepreneur and business owner has been able to find an opening only as an administrative assist-

ant, for \$45,000 a year. And that, she says, is de-

for where I am. No one can do anything to you that you don't allow them to.

"But, in the same breath, I have to take responsibility for changing things, too for making things better."

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