

# jody stahancyk:

## Is Portland's top divorce lawyer a barracuda or a pussycat?

by Maggi White  
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**Jody Stahancyk laughs easily and doesn't mind telling stories about herself.** This one really makes her chuckle: A client called her office and said, "I want to speak to Jody the Barracuda."

If you're considered to be the top divorce lawyer in town-representing many of the rich and well-placed-you can't be a pussycat, that's for sure.

But her ace in the hole is not meanness, it's handholding her clients-right down to "dressing all my friends" for divorce. She calls the process "a business reorganization with tears" She's also saved marriages, utilizing her coaching technique as a way to mend tender human feelings.

Too often, says Stahancyk, lawyers who specialize in domestic relations aren't user-friendly enough. She does what she was advise against-she gives out her home phone number, her cell phone, her night line and (now) her phone number at her new office in Bend, Ore. She tries to listen for what her clients need to help them reach a positive outcome. "Sometimes they don't need a divorce, they need counseling on a new view of how to resolve their differences," she says. "I've saved a lot of marriages. Our staff has a very low divorce rate." She's been married to the same man since 1974 "and wouldn't consider divorce for one minute. I know how lucky I am." Her husband, John Crawford, is a business lawyer

specializing in bankruptcy and works for another firm. They have two children, Seth, 19, and Kate, 16.

People who are divorcing are suffering from a sense of failure, she says. "I've never seen anyone happy to have a relationship end, even a bad one. A marriage doesn't start out with people expecting things to go bad.

When it happens, the experience puts you way back to how you felt in high school when you break up with the boy or girl you were going with. It's intense loneliness in the pit of your stomach and something you didn't think you would experience again. It's terrifying to feel you're not going to be with that person anymore. And if you want the divorce, you feel cornered, that you can't get away from them. Even heads of big companies feel it, the hurt that they thought they'd gotten beyond feeling."

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The barracuda image, she says, comes from the fact that she stays calm and is focused on what's right and fair, and doesn't become emotional on the issues. In a woman, she pointed out, that can seem domineering and scary, although her height (over six feet) and her quarterback size alone could accomplish that.

For some women, getting through a divorce allows for personal growth and it shows them how to be a grown-up., She says. The reason she empathizes with her clients, she feels, is because she had to knock on every door in town, and people told her she couldn't become a domestic relations lawyer. She also knows what it's like to be the tallest girl in high school. (She grew up on a ranch in Prineville.)

"I was always one of those people who believed they could do what they weren't supposed to be able to do," she says. "If I didn't accomplish it the first time, I'd figure out why and try again." She says listening to clients is encouraging to the people, even if

they're acting out of control. "What you do is take a person who's afraid and you educate and help them solve their own problems. I really like people, I'm not afraid of people who are emotionally upset."

She says too many lawyers are too focused on the fiscal issues of the divorce and not on the personal needs. She believes the personal and the shouldn't run a parallel course. "I've got the deepest dimples," says Stahanczyk. "I'm not a tough nut. My calmness confuses people who think my comfort is a sign that I'm mean. I'm kind but very firm." She adds: "When's the last time you yelled at your kids and felt in control?"

Her goal is the "right deal," which she described as meeting both parties needs, realizing that "some people complain if they were hung on a new rope." She helps her clients clarify what they need and why, and then find a fit. Some clients don't know what they want or need and "some lawyers don't sit and take the time to really listen," she says. "I always ask the question, what's waking you up in the middle of the night that you're ashamed of worrying about the next morning? "People divorcing are frightened. Being alone is terrifying to people. It reminds them of when they were sent to their room as a little children,

because we punish people by removing them from society." Fright has no limit as to income. Millionaires are as frightened as people of limited means, she says. People are even frightened when they find their net worth is substantially more than they thought, because they fear the responsibility that goes with it.

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According to Stahancyk, "Men leave women for another woman, women leave men for other ways of life. Women want to be in control but think

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it's kind of nice for someone else to take care of the responsibilities. For men, divorce is very lonely and they find another woman to replace their spouses before they even decide to leave. What I try to show people is that we do hurtful and unkind things when we ourselves are afraid, and so we want to get our lick in first. We don't wake up in the morning to be a stinker. When people are attacked, I ask them to find what the attacker is afraid of instead of striking back. I tell them the fear is the other person's problem, not theirs. They leave with a new view that people are basically good but behave bad because they are afraid," she says.

Men are terribly afraid of losing what they've built and they grieve over the loss of family, that's one of the saddest areas. It's particularly sad when it's a young couple with children and it's the woman's desire to leave, or a couple is divorcing after the children go to college and the woman is left by a man before his business reaches full value. The system doesn't work well in that regard," she says. Stahancyk believes that the trend in divorce is to return to fault if there's an economic partnership and the spouse leaves and weakens the position of the other before the business reaches its full potential.

Divorce can be expensive, from \$1000 to a "as much as they can afford to spend," says Stahancyk, due to the complexity of assets and issues. Some clients have a desire to use the process as a way to damage the other. She doesn't believe in encouraging the latter. She asks her clients to determine whether they're dodging balls. "The lawyer should make sure the moves count and that they're not temper tantrums," she says.

Either sex "can be pretty mean," says Stahancyk. "No sex has the corner on bad taste." She defines that as saying or doing hurtful things or putting children in the middle. "I'm real clear on what I won't tolerate," she says. "I tell the client, how would you feel if your mother or father did that to you?"

She adds: "It's very important to me that people accept responsibility for their own actions. If they helped cause the problem, they can help be a part of the solution." She believes forgiveness can come when people realize that most hurtful things come out of fear or weakness.

Often within one year the person who left doesn't want a divorce, and the person being left considers the separation the best thing that ever happened, she says. "You find that leaving doesn't cure the problem and if the relationship was abusive you'll find another abusive relationship unless you work on finding out why you allowed it. Reasons are usually internal issues. It's liberating to take responsibility for yourself."

'Divorce is a **business**  
reorganization with tears.'

Stahancyk's law office opened in 1986 and she now has seven associates and two law clerks. Her office has a full kitchen and a chef, Alfred Popp, who sports a tattoo on his arm. She says her clients feel there's more privacy in her office than out in a restaurant. "When people see people with me, they assume they're getting a divorce," she says. The chef is also there to see that everyone on the staff has good, wholesome food instead of sandwiches and fast foods at their desk. "It's an intense operation," Stahancyk says.

She provides food for breakfast, for late hours and for students who work

there after school. The chef also makes sure that the kitchen is stocked with healthful snacks.

Stahancyk packs in a full day. She says she has no sense of time and wishes there were more than 24 hours in a day. She's a mother, a wife, and a volunteer (she's on the board of Linfield College). She is the "godmother" of the Grant High School football team, goes to concerts like the Stones and Elton John, likes to people-watch downtown and window shop, go to their home in Gearhart, their house in Prineville, a time share in Cabo during Spring Break, and dozens of other activities. She even gets her hair done the same time as her friend Wilma Caplan, so they can visit together. Stahancyk gardens and makes potpourri, does crafts, makes gifts, tools around in her 1984 500 SEL Mercedes ("its' solid like I am"), and enjoys the process of acquiring things more than having them.

These days Stahancyk says she is less into acquiring, and more into working to do things. She is active at Trinity Episcopal Church, goes out to dinner with friends a lot, plays Pitch and makes it a point to do things with people who have nothing to do with law. She says socializing with people outside of her business is to "have a fresh perspective separate from the arena of domestic relations." She joins with neighbors every Saturday morning at Store !! on Northeast Killingsworth to go junking and has been doing that for 15 years. "Everything I do I have fun at," she comments. "Most people," she says, "don't finish the circle. They were going to say something nice, but didn't get around to it. They were going to do something nice, they didn't"

She finishes the circle.