

**SMILE Program celebrates 17 years  
of helping families of divorce**



**OAKLAND COUNTY'S SMILE PROGRAM (Start Making It Livable for Everyone) recently celebrated its 17th anniversary on Thursday, March 1. SMILE co-founders reunited for the anniversary presentation of the program in the Board of Commissioners Auditorium at the Oakland County Courthouse. Bloomfield Hills family law attorney Richard S. Victor (left) and Oakland County Circuit Court Judge Edward Sosnick (right) presented the evening session with Dr. Nancy Fishman, a Birmingham psychologist who helped author the original SMILE program.**

*Photo by John Meiu*

**SMILE Anniversary  
Program celebrates 17 years  
of helping families through divorce**

*By Maria Dell'Isola  
Legal News*

A program known for its positive impact on families in Oakland County and across the country reached a new milestone this month. SMILE (Start Making It Livable for Everyone), a program for divorcing parents with children under the age of 18, celebrated its 17th anniversary on Thursday, March 1. Oakland County Circuit Court Judge Edward Sosnick, formerly of the Family Division, and family law attorney Richard S. Victor of Bloomfield Hills founded SMILE. The program assists parents with understanding the effects of divorce, the needs of their children, and promotes their children's healthy adjustment to divorce. Currently, all parents of minors going through divorce proceedings in Oakland County are required to attend the SMILE program, which is conducted by a family court judge, a family law attorney, and a licensed

psychologist. All of the Circuit Court's Family Division judges rotate presenting part of the program, and all of the professionals involved volunteer their time. SMILE presentations are conducted on the first Thursday of every month in the Board of Commissioners Auditorium at the Oakland County Courthouse in Pontiac. While parents are generally assigned a date to attend a presentation, the program welcomes other interested individuals. Sosnick and Victor conducted the March session to mark SMILE's anniversary. They were joined by Dr. Nancy Fishman, a Birmingham psychologist in private practice and an author and presenter of the original program. After a leave of absence, Fishman has returned to presenting SMILE in rotation with other therapists. At the presentation, Sosnick told parents about the purpose of SMILE. "In a nutshell, we're asking you to give your child a gift – the right to love both of you – because that child is indeed part of both of you forever." SMILE is based on the understanding that when relationships between soon-to-be divorced couples sour, increased tension between the parents can affect – and even harm – children and families. "Children of divorce often hurt inside," Sosnick said. "The fact that the two most important people in their life live apart is painful. Fortunately, even though children do not like divorce, they can learn to live with it and do well." Victor compared a child's experience of divorce involving high conflict with another situation children may encounter. He asked parents to imagine a child having to decide where to sit when two good friends are at opposite ends of the school cafeteria, and the child knows that the friends don't get along. "In that moment, the child has the agony of the decision: Where are they going to sit?" Victor said. "If you multiply the agony of that split-second decision thousands of times, that's what your children feel when they perceive two people whom they love not liking each other." Asking parents to consider the point further, Victor asked, "How do they choose? What do you think goes through their minds? And if you think about it logically, do you really want to put them in the position of having to choose?" With strong images like these in parents' minds, SMILE invites parents to consider how their behavior around such issues as child support payments and visitation agreements will affect their children. "When a parent fails to pay child support, they may do it to try to frustrate or hurt the other parent," Victor said. "It's not done to hurt the child; it's done to get back or react to things that you feel have happened to you. But invariably what happens? The child is caught in the middle of the parent's emotional action or reaction." SMILE encourages parents to make positive behavioral choices even in difficult situations because those behaviors can benefit children and families. "High conflict between parents is the single best predictor of a poor outcome for your children," Sosnick said. "Children who experience cooperative divorce arrangements and are given permission to love both parents do much better than children who are caught in conflict." Noting that divorce does not have to destroy a family, Fishman spoke about "reconstituting" the family after divorce, emphasizing the importance of the whole family's presence and love for the children involved. Fishman offered 14 suggestions for parents to help them relate effectively to their children during and after the divorce. Suggestions included having both parents tell the child about the divorce together, making time every day to talk with the children, always speaking respectfully to and about each other, and allowing the child to be loved by everyone in the family. The audience of more than 100 people included some divorcing couples who attended the session together, while others arrived alone or with a friend. The group often responded emotionally to the things they heard from the presenters. Many were visibly moved as they watched a video that highlighted stories from divorced parents and children living with divorce. "We have seen a full range of emotions among the program's attendees," Fishman said in a recent interview. "Sometimes we see couples come through the front door screaming at each other. After the presentation, those same couples have been seen talking with respect and civility," Fishman noted. At all presentations, parents receive copies of the SMILE Handbook, which includes sections on how children may respond to divorce based on their ages, advice for time sharing, and "divorce games" to avoid because no one wins. The handbook also includes the "Children's Bill of Rights" (see box), suggested readings, and a list of community resources. SMILE grew out of a conversation between Sosnick and Victor at a meeting of the Family Law Section of the State Bar of Michigan. At the meeting, Sosnick talked to Victor about children he had interviewed in custody cases. He said that one child came into his chambers "looking like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders" because he felt torn between two parents in a divorce. Sosnick and Victor talked about the need for an educational program that could teach parents the value of cooperative divorce arrangements, where children are freed from parental conflict and are allowed to enjoy close, loving relationships with both parents. Sosnick and Victor teamed with mental health professionals to build the curriculum for parent education about divorce. When SMILE first started, people were told about the program after their divorces. They would often find out about SMILE sessions in newspapers based in Oakland County.

"We would get evaluations back that said, 'Why didn't I know sooner?'" Victor said.

Family court judges began sending pending divorce cases to the SMILE program, as well as cases with a high degree of conflict. Family court judges also began volunteering their time, along with the other professionals involved. Eventually, SMILE became a requirement for couples going through divorce proceedings. Victor also promoted SMILE to colleagues in the State Bar's Family Law Section, which he chaired during the 1990s. By the program's 10th year, every county in the state either had a live SMILE program or used SMILE in working with divorcing couples.

Through his involvement with the American Association of Matrimonial Lawyers (AAML), Victor promoted the SMILE program to members across the country, encouraging people to use the information as it suited their needs. Members from forty-seven states requested information about the program. Today, Victor reports that SMILE is in all 50 states. SMILE has become a significant part of Victor's work in his 33 years as a family law attorney. His career also includes work on grandparents' rights and teaching classes on family law at local universities. "When you practice family law, you will impact generations," Victor said. He and many others believe that SMILE helps make the divorce process more cooperative and harmonious. In addition to seeing generations of clients in his own practice, Victor is preparing to turn

over the administration of the program to his son, Daniel R. Victor, of The Law Offices of Richard S. Victor, P.L.L.C. His son has been a SMILE presenter for the past three years and has become a partner in his father's firm. Victor is proud of his son's involvement. "Dan is involved in re-vamping the program," he said. After 17 years, Richard Victor still presents SMILE sessions, rotating with other attorneys, and he presents the anniversary session each year. Victor estimates that approximately 100,000 people in Oakland County have attended SMILE presentations, and hundreds of thousands of people have participated in the program nationally. Nearly five years ago, SMILE expanded internationally when two therapists from Australia found the SMILE program on the Internet and expressed interest. Peter Simmonds and Gay Moran came to Michigan to meet with Victor and to experience the program. They are currently running SMILE in conjunction with the Australian government. "It is so rewarding to know this has been ongoing for 17 years, and we've touched so many lives with this program," Fishman said. Sosnick shared Fishman's sentiment, and reflected on the way the program has retained its integrity as it has grown and changed. "Like many things, it's been a work in progress," Sosnick said. "I'm gratified that the basic message is timeless and we're still getting that across. "I'm happy that it has sustained," he continued. "It's a permanent part of this court, and I'm really glad that it is."

---

*A copy of the SMILE handbook can be downloaded from the Oakland County Friend of the Court Web site by clicking on the "SMILE Program" link at [www.oakgov.com/courts/](http://www.oakgov.com/courts/). For questions about the SMILE program, contact Oakland County Friend of the Court at (248) 858-0453 or contact Richard Victor at (248) 646-7177.*