

After divorce, a new name symbolizes a new life

By Marilyn Gardner
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During Meg Bertini's divorce in 2002, she faced a dilemma. She did not want to keep her married name, but she wasn't eager to revert to her maiden name, either.

"It was 'heavy' and just didn't reflect who I was any longer," says Bertini, president of DreamTime Publishing in Las Vegas.

She solved the problem by making up her surname of Bertini. She created it by using the last part of her father's first name, RoBERT, then adding INI at the end in a nod to her mother's Italian heritage.

"Generally I tell people it's family-derived from my mother's side, and that tends to work," she says. "I just shrug off the jokes that I must be in the witness protection program to change my name in that way."

When couples undo their "I do's" and go their separate ways, women who took their husband's name when they married may find themselves with complex decisions to make. These involve children, parents, careers -- and a sense of identity.

"Most of the time, women with children like to keep their married name so it's consistent with their children," says Sharon Soho, a family law attorney in Newton, Mass., and a partner with Divorce.net. "Some women, even without children, prefer to keep their married name because it sounds better, or it's the name they use professionally." A few add a new last name and use their previous last name as a middle name.

Those who, like Bertini, want to start fresh have many options. But they can also face obstacles.

Diane Dobry, marketing director at Teachers College, Columbia University in New York, divorced recently after 28 years of marriage. She had just started a wine import business based on her maternal grandmother's maiden name. The family came from Hungary, as does the wine.

"I was planning to change my last name to Kristof to match my new company name so I could say, 'Diane Kristof, president of Kristof Wines,'" Dobry explains. "But someone told me it might not be a good idea because of possible problems relating to trying to

collect on my ex-husband's benefits if I do not remarry. If I change my name, it might be difficult to prove that I did not remarry, since it is not my maiden name." She is researching the issue.

Making a name change legal at the time of a divorce is easiest when it involves taking back a birth name or a previous married name.

"When you divorce, the decree normally gives you permission to resume using your premarital name," says Brette McWhorter Sember of Clarence, N.Y., a former divorce attorney. "If you want to choose another name, you have to go through a legal name-change process. It generally requires that you file a petition with the court explaining why you want the change. Then you have to publish a notice of the change in a newspaper of record chosen by the court, so creditors and other interested parties are notified. Then the change is finalized."

Filing fees vary by county. Linda Trott, a name-change researcher in Anaheim, Calif., has seen them range from under \$100 to \$700.

When Shari Goldstein of Suffolk County, Long Island, N.Y., divorced in 1996, she considered taking her maternal grandmother's maiden name. Her two young sons objected.

"They gazed at me with their big brown eyes and said, 'But Mummy, if you change your last name, you won't have the same last name as us.'" So she kept her married name and used it for her public relations business.

That all changed last month when she remarried and took her new husband's name.

"I thought for a little while of going back to my maiden name, but I'm not that person anymore," Goldstein says. "As there are many other Shari Goldsteins in the world, I'm also happy that I'm taking a much less common last name."

As for her sons, now in high school, she says, "They're not thrilled, but they understand."

Goldstein estimates that it could take a year to complete the name changes, personal and professional, including her Web sites.

"Gone are the days of simply changing a Social Security card, passport and driver's license," says Trott. "There are simply more people to notify. Each agency, government and nongovernment, has its own requirements."

Checklists also include memberships, clubs, associations, insurance companies, frequent-flier accounts and schools attended.

Men sometimes want to change their name after a divorce, too. Sooho says, "If a man married Smith and he was Mr. Jones, he might have hyphenated his name and become Smith-Jones. But when he divorces, he prefers to use Jones."

After Bonnie Russell reverted to her birth name after her divorce, she realized she

had outgrown it. She then took a radical step, dropping her last name, à la Madonna and Cher.

This proved problematic. "In the eyes of our bureaucracy, it meant my new last name was NLN No Last Name," says Russell, a legal publicist in Del Mar, Calif. "That phase lasted two years." Then she reverted to her maiden name and decided that would be her surname from then on.

Whatever the decisions and paperwork, all the effort can be worthwhile. "My new name is only one of the symbols that I've restructured and improved my life," says Ammen.

Bertini is also pleased.

"My father grumbled, my mother was confused, and many of my friends thought I was a bit odd," she says. "But my name feels right to me, so I'm happy."



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