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Love gone wrong
Divorces don't stop on Valentine's Day
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CANTON Happy Valentine's Day, darling — and goodbye.

While florists, jewelers and restaurants enjoyed a giant love-fest Thursday, Stark County's divorce court didn't stand still on Cupid's finest day. In all, 44 hearings related to various divorce cases were scheduled on that day. Once lovers until death do they part, now fighting over dollars and cents or their children. Or, in some cases, giving up and admitting they made a mistake.

Cassandra James recognized the cruel irony.

On the elevator ride to the sixth floor of the downtown county building, the Massillon woman asked some Family Court employees the obvious: "Why would you guys schedule divorces on Valentine's Day?"

The answer: Feb. 14 is just another day.

At 8:40 a.m., she and her husband, Chris James, entered Judge David Stucki's courtroom and sat next to each other at a table. The couple didn't have an attorney. They filled out the divorce papers themselves.

Chris James made a mistake on them. He'd written the wrong year of their marriage, indicating they'd wed on Aug. 24, 2002. Cassandra James told the judge it actually was 2001, so she fixed it. They'd already divided up what little property and what few debts they'd accumulated. She got a Honda CRV. He kept a house he'd inherited.

"It appears everything is in order," Stucki said.

He double-checked facts in their paperwork.

"Do you believe this is a fair agreement?" he asked.

"Yes," they nodded in unison.

Stucki asked if they wanted to speak with a pastor or counselor.

They declined.

Any other questions, the judge offered.

"No. No." they replied.

With that, he granted a dissolution (uncontested divorce). Stucki signed an order and restored Cassandra's last name to Longshore. When the couple filed the judge's order in the clerk's office at the end of the hallway, it would be official.

Side by side, just as couples walk back up the aisle after they become husband and wife, the Jameses headed to the clerk's office. Past 10 purple and pink hearts on a window beside the door. In the shadow of red "Happy Valentine's Day" letters plastered on two walls inside the office. Beneath dangling, decorative hearts hanging from the ceiling. The couple ultimately passed an inflatable baby cupid, with bow and arrow in hand. The decoration included broken and jagged hearts and the phrase "Love Hurts."

At the clerk's counter, they filed their papers.

At 8:58 a.m., Chris James walked out.

At 8:59 a.m., Cassandra Longshore walked out — single again.

Her eyes welled with tears. They'd grown apart, she explained. This was for the best. But it didn't make it any easier. They were so in love a few short years ago. Now this, on Valentine's Day.

"No one gets married thinking they're going to divorce," she said.

LOVE AND LOATHE

In a year, more than 1,500 divorces and dissolutions are approved in Family Court. That doesn't include thousands of other hearings related to divorces. Where couples argue over visitation rights for their children. Or fight over whether each side is following the particulars of the divorce agreement.

Couples would do themselves a favor by discussing practical aspects of marriage before saying "I

do," said Judge Michael Howard. Finances is a huge issue, as well as philosophies on raising children and household duties, he said. It's simpler to move on after a divorce when the couple has no children, he added.

"The divorce is never really over when you have children," he said.

Judge Jim James said a few years ago he scheduled a divorce for a couple named Valentine — on Valentine's Day. He has seen couples fight over everything from a bottle of Avon aftershave lotion to a stepladder. Once, after a couple settled all finances, they couldn't resolve who would keep a Mickey Mouse collector plate.

A coin flip settled it.

Stucki said he held a trial over a \$29.95 velvet Elvis Presley painting. He's also presided over pet custody and visitation battles. "Is it the painting itself? Probably not," he said. "It's the emotion of the whole situation."

He has observed couples where he can't fathom how they ever got together in the first place. Then again, he's seen couples fight for a year, then reconcile. And he's divorced the same couple multiple times.

"To me, there's a fine line between love and hate," he said.

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