

Do-it-yourself divorce is a don't

By JESSICA GARRISON
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LOS ANGELES — When Yanic Chan and Vanessa Van split up in 1995, they could not afford a lawyer. So, like thousands of other people without money, they filled out the divorce paperwork themselves, with help from a friend and courthouse staff.

In November 1997, Van went to the Riverside County Courthouse to enter a final judgment. "The clerk put the stamp on it," Van said. "I asked, 'Everything finished?' She said 'Yes.'"

Chan returned to his native Cambodia, fell in love and married again. Then, in 2006, he tried to bring his new wife to this country. That's when Van and Chan got a nasty surprise, one that court officials fear could be awaiting thousands of other former couples: Their divorce had not gone through.

Driven by rising legal fees, a shortage of legal-aid lawyers and a do-it-yourself philosophy, many people handle their own divorces.

Many of them are not quite as divorced as they think they are. Some, like Chan, are even accidental bigamists, carrying not only hopes and dreams but also an earlier marriage to their new one.

Tens of thousands of others

have some understanding that their divorces are not done. But stumped by complex paperwork and court procedures and unable to afford thousands of dollars for attorneys, they simply let their cases languish.

Officials don't have statistics because they don't monitor cases to make sure they are finished. But the evidence they have worries them.

One Los Angeles County Superior Court judge, Mark Juhas, found that about one-third of the roughly 3,600 divorce cases filed in 2001 and 2002 and assigned to his courtroom remained open. Some of those couples may have reconciled, but Juhas suspects that many more are stuck or may even think they are divorced when they are not.

Bonnie Hough is supervising attorney for the Center for Families, Children and the

Courts, a division of the state Judicial Council's Administrative Office of the Courts. She noted a study in Placer County, Calif., in the 1980s that found that 30 percent of people there who filed for divorce did not complete the process.

At one legal-services center in the Van Nuys district of Los Angeles, officials say they see 20 people a month who wrongly thought they were divorced.

"They come in screaming," said Norma Valencia, a paralegal at the center operated by Neighborhood Legal Services. "They say, 'You don't understand my situation. I want a divorce right now.'"

Others show up weeping: They've remarried without a finalized divorce and they're afraid to tell their new spouse.

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