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## Women's divorce group inspires author

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Every season, about 25 divorcing Georgia women retreat into the state's northern mountains for three days of advice, bonding and TLC.

When best-selling author Cassandra King, wife of Pat Conroy, attended a retreat last year in support of a divorcing sister, she saw the makings of her next novel: women writing their angst on slips of paper and then burning them over candle flames; volunteers keeping a chocolate fountain going around the clock; women dancing with scarves or quietly writing in their journals.

King, author of "The Sunday Wife," and "The Same Sweet Girls," decided to base her newest book, "Queen of Broken Hearts," on the divorce retreat experience.

"I saw these women who, when they first arrived, were really desolate and broken-hearted women, but by the end, I could see the hope," King said.

Today, King will be the guest speaker at Visions Anew's "Ruby Slipper Gala" in Buckhead.

The proceeds from the event will go toward a fund to help cover the costs for divorcing women who can't afford the \$450-all-inclusive tab for the retreat.

Margot Swann, founder of Visions Anew -- a nonprofit organization providing support and resources for divorcing women -- started holding the divorce retreats in 1998.

Swann, who divorced in 1996, said some of the most powerful moments take place at night when women, lounging in pajamas around a fireplace, share their greatest fears.

"We all have these night terrors that we are going to be on the street, we see ourselves as bag ladies, and we are going to lose our children," Swann said.

Deb Ingham of Dallas, Ga., said she felt "terribly depressed" and "hopeless" as she took her first steps inside the retreat center. But after a weekend of co-parenting tips, financial advice and connecting with other women, she left the retreat armed with a renewed sense of confidence. She said she learned the importance of "biting her tongue" and to never say anything negative about her ex to her three sons.

"I was very broken up into many pieces," said Ingham, who is now 45. "But by the end, I could regain some of the pieces of the puzzle. I felt, 'I can get through this.'"

After the retreat, Ingham kept in touch with other women in the group, e-mailing and calling some of the women when she needed support.

Some days, Ingham wears Mardi Gras beads given to her by Swann at the close of the retreat -- "a reminder that I have support and I am not alone and I can get through this."

### IF YOU GO

What: Visions Anew's "Ruby Slipper Gala"

When: 6 to 9 p.m. today at Knollwood, 3351 Woodhaven Road, Atlanta (adjacent to the Governor's Mansion).

Cost: \$60 (sponsorships are available) or more information about the gala or Visions Anew's divorce retreats and other programs, go to [www.visionsanew.org](http://www.visionsanew.org) or call 770-953-2882.