

# STEPFAMILIES

*Providing Education and Support*

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## Inside

President's Message / p. 2

Stepfamily Togetherness / p. 4

VISTA Update / p. 5

Second Wife poetry / p. 5

Counselor's Corner / p. 6

Chapter Highlight / p. 8

Poetry / p. 8

Step Write Up / p. 9

Board Bio / p. 9

Research Update / p. 10

Book Reviews / p. 11

Director's Report / p. 13

Poem / p.13

Best Articles, available / 14

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## ILL WILL

by Julie Hatfield

### LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

**I**f you think drawing up your will is complicated, try being part of a stepfamily. For example, consider Michael Jendrysik of Boston, who never lived with his stepmother and never will. Jendrysik's father married her when he was 63 and died a year later. He willed her their home, plus a separate trust. Three months later, Jendrysik, age 36, is still muttering about the bad feelings surrounding the inheritance, even though he and his brother received the rest of the estate.

"My stepmother staked out her territory and made it very clear what now belonged to her," he said. "I think it's fine that he provided her with the house, but I don't expect to ever go in the house again, and I don't especially want to." As families become more cumbersome and complex with the proliferation of divorce and remarriage, so too do the legal implications. For an unfortunate number of reasons, children and stepchildren are rarely equal when it comes to their inheritances. The potential for jealousy and bad feelings is enormous. Entitlement reverts back to bloodlines, and stepchildren may battle stepparents who are seeking a share of the spouse's estate for their own children.

Sometimes the reverse is true. Consider the case of a client of attorney Christopher Carlson, who was so enamored of her son's stepchildren that she wanted to see them defined in the will as the children of her son. "She felt her natural-born grandchild, whose mother had already provided for him, did not need another inheritance," he said.

Or take the case of the California stepfather who, for whatever animosities he had toward his stepchild, directed in his will that not only was the stepchild not to receive the farm, but that if the farm were sold, the stepchild could not even buy it!

"You almost need to be a psychologist" when it comes to wills and stepfamilies, said William D. Kirchiek, a trust attorney with Bingham, Dana & Gould. "Sometimes the couple doesn't want to face the issue of dividing money between biological and stepchildren. There are competing interests." Frequently, he said, stepchildren fault the stepmother because she is receiving money from their parent.

Not that complications in stepfamilies end with the immediate family.

"It's hard for grandparents to leave money to stepchildren of their children," said Natalie Choate, and estate planning lawyer with Bingham, Dana & Gould. "And they are reluctant to do this. Sometimes they'll leave it up to their chil-

Continued on page 3

# PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Judith L. Bauersfeld, Ph.D.



**A**s I prepared to write this column, it occurred to me that this article is my next to last as president of SAA.

I will have only one more opportunity to communicate with all of you through this column. SAA has had important impact on my life. From the very first time I attended a national stepfamily conference until now, a

whole new group of people became my friends, and then my dear friends. And when we meet two or three times a year, it is a time for business as well as celebration.

Looking back on my association with SAA I always remember the "story" – the beginning of SAA. Many not-for-profit associations had small beginnings which began because of personal need. SAA is one of those. While I am not as skillful at telling the tale as Emily and John Visher are, it is worth the retelling here in this column. I'll bet there are many new SAA members and readers who don't know how it all began. Emily and John are professionals in the behavioral health field. Emily, a Ph.D. in Psychology, and John, a medical doctor who practiced psychiatry, believed that bringing two families together would be quite easy. After all, they were professionals in the behavioral health field. Hearing them tell the stories about the first years of putting two families together is at the same time comical and poignant.

Emily and John would be the first to tell you that they made every mistake in the book. And so in an effort to find solutions to the common issues related to remarriage and stepfamily life they founded The Stepfamily Association of America. The first office was located in the Visher's kitchen. Emily and John each brought four children to their stepfamily and as they worked on solutions to their own problems they also began to develop support groups and newsletters and workshops to help others in their struggles with step issues.

As SAA grew, the office moved and grew – three times. As the office became larger and as a small paid staff was hired

we grew our constituency and word spread about SAA. During almost twenty years Emily and John learned and taught and wrote and remained involved. It is rare to be involved in an organization when the founders are not only world famous, but who are still as busy as they ever were in furthering the knowledge base and yes, the importance of this organization. One might say that with the Visher's help it all started here.

It's worth telling the story for many reasons. Arguably, the entire field of interest related to remarriage and stepfamilies gained notice and momentum from humble beginnings in Emily Visher's kitchen. Look at this area of study today. It is large and very professional. Clearly, the Stepfamily Association of America and its impact on stepfamilies all over the world came as a result of the not-for-profit known as SAA. Now that's an accomplishment.

As we look at SAA today, it's important for all of us to know the story of how we got here.

On January 1, 1998, Margorie Engel will assume the Presidency of SAA, bringing new energy, new ideas and fresh approaches to old (and new) issues. I remain as Immediate Past President for one year – an advisory position as part of the executive committee where I will, of course, advise.

## BOARD NEWS

The semi-annual board meeting will be held in Philadelphia October 31 through November 2, 1997. In addition to holding the usual board meeting, a two day symposium for stepfamily professionals will take place. More details soon.

The board of directors is looking for new members. Specifically, we are interested in individuals with expertise in the fields of public relations/marketing, law, clergy, and education. Board members must be able to attend two board meetings a year in different parts of the United States. If you are interested, please call Judith L. Bauersfeld, Ph.D. at 602-661-5986.

## STEPFAMILIES

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Editor: Lynn Naugle Haspel

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## ILL WILL

Continued from page 1

dren to decide whom to give the inheritance to.”

Choate acknowledged that there are grandparents who will divide their inheritance equally among their stepgrandchildren, especially if those children have been part of the family for a long time. But other grandparents, she said, find such a division very uncomfortable.

“Some of the grandparents tell me that ‘My son wants me to recognize these kids as my grandkids when they don’t even recognize me at the airport.’ Or, if their daughter has stepchildren but she has had a troubled second marriage and they’re not sure if she might get divorced again, these particular stepgrandchildren could be gone forever; why include them in the will? Sometimes, for these reasons, grandparents stop giving gifts altogether. It’s just too complicated and delicate.”

As far as stepchildren’s rights to the will, there are none, attorneys say.

“Without a will,” said professor Margaret Mahoney of the University of Pittsburgh, who specializes in stepfamilies in the law of interstate succession and wills, “If you don’t live in California, succession statutes fail to recognize family relationships that are not based on blood.”

It is almost impossible for attorneys to remain neutral in the family dynamics when they are helping to formulate the will.

“One of the difficulties in making up wills is that many of the attorneys who draw up the wills try to push toward the biological children,” said Emily Visser, who with her husband John started the Stepfamily Association of America. “Society is saying two things: You’ve got to love your stepchildren equally, but, as the lawyers say, don’t give them your inheritance equally.”

Boston lawyer Lucy Behymer admitted that “people usually favor their own kids,” meaning their biological children, in making up their wills. But there are many factors that come into play, she said, such as who controls the money, the personalities of the stepparents, their relationships with each child, what the lawyer suggested and who the judge is. As Margorie Engel, a Boston counselor and author of books specializing in families complicated by divorce, said of the rules of stepfamily wills, “Everything is cast in Jell-O.”

Lawyers agree that resentments, anger and emotional outbursts occur regularly in their offices, when parents and stepparents discover that their children are going to be treated differently. Some lawyers, however, are also stepparents, and they tend to be more understanding of and sensitive to the situation, explained Boston lawyer Arthur L. Bowen. He has divided up his own assets

equally between his wife, his sister and his stepson, who was 12 when he came into Bowen’s life. “He has a small trust fund set up by a paternal grandparent,” said Bowen, “and he has a living father, but he has very little contact with him; perhaps once or twice a year, he sees him. He is, as far as my will goes, my son.”

Most probate lawyers agree with Kirchick that the harmonious stepfamily is the exception, not the rule, when it comes to wills. John and Anne Helman, of Needham, both lawyers, he 46 and she 41, brought four children into their marriage, ages 7 through 9. Two were hers, one was his, and one was his stepchild from his first wife’s first marriage.

“Our combined assets will be given equally to all four kids,” said John Helman, “We treat all four of them exactly the same. We live our life like a first marriage.”

Those who have experienced working in the field agree that the potential for pitfalls seems unlimited.

There are even cases in which a stepparent inadvertently would give his assets to a stepchild and leave his biological child with nothing. Charles Doody of Worcester, who “out of laziness” has not yet made a will, acknowledged this could happen to him if he died without one. Doody noted that his Teamsters union even offers free wills to members, but his wife, Lynn, said, “I’m not pushing it.” Here’s why: The couple has two daughters, one from his first marriage and one from their current marriage. If Charles Doody should die without a will, the laws are such that all of his estate goes to Lynn, who could designate that upon her death, the rest of the estate goes to her daughter, and not to her stepdaughter, who her husband brought to this marriage. “I might designate a piece of my jewelry to go to my stepdaughter,” Lynn Doody said.

But even when a stepparent tries to be fair to all children, the plan can backfire. Consider the horror story of the Boston area husband who decided, after much discussion with his second wife and his lawyer, that he would like to include his three stepchildren in his will in addition to the two biological children he had already mentioned. After drawing up the newly altered will, a secretary in the lawyer’s office sent it off to the man’s wife.

Unfortunately, it was the first wife to whom she accidentally sent it, and there was hell to pay when she read the will aloud to her children, noting how much money and property they had just lost to strangers.

Continued on page 4

# Stepfamily Togetherness

Lynn Naugle Haspel, Editor, *Stepfamilies*

**M**ost stepparents are looking for ways to bond their family members into some semblance of a unit. One of the things that is recommended is to create new rituals for your new family. Children love repetition and celebrations. They gain a sense of belonging from activities that are repeated on a predictable basis.

In an article written by Chick Moorman entitled "Family Spirit: Strategies to Promote Togetherness", one of his suggestions caught my eye. The idea of celebrating "Firsts" seemed like a great way to emphasize the positive aspects of a new family configuration. Reprinted below is Mr. Moorman's explanation of "Firsts" as celebrated in his family:

**FIRSTS:** This term has special meaning in our family and is cause for celebration. Firsts are defined as any event, success, or goal achievement that occurs for the first time. These firsts are benchmarks in our lives that signal an active participation in life and a willingness to take risks. They are visible reminders of our growth. As such they deserve special recognition. Some firsts we have recognized include Randy pitching a shut-out, Matt learning how to read; me publishing the book, *Where The Heart Is: Stories of Home and Family*; Jenny getting on the honor roll; me doing a workshop for teachers in a foreign country; and Matt learning to ride his bike.

Our celebration of each first is done on purpose, with a specific format, for a specific reason. We showcase firsts by going out to dinner together. The individual who achieves the first becomes the focus person. He or she chooses the time and place for the celebration.

At the appointed time we come together as a family to share a meal, acknowledge the individual, and practice collective caring. The focus person takes the spotlight and tells about his special moment, communicating feelings, reactions, impressions, or any new goals he or she has set. The rest of the family listens without interrupting the narrative. When the focus person has finished sharing, the rest of us participate by telling what we liked about either the first or the reaction of the person who produced it. Informal conversation follows until the conclusion of our celebration.

Celebrating firsts is a ritual in our family that didn't just happen. I designed it intentionally to meet a specific desire. I wanted our children to feel a strong sense of belonging and family pride. And because attainment of that spirit is so important, I deliberately work to create what I call the "our family" feeling.

Togetherness and family pride don't occur accidentally. Luck, magic, or happenstance are not responsible for pro-

ducing feelings of connectedness and belonging. Parents (or a single parent) produce family spirit. And they do it by purposefully structuring activities that allow for it to develop.

Many of you have developed your own set of rituals or activities to promote that family feeling. Let us know about your successes and even your failures. We would love to share your experiences with stepfamilies across the nation. □

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*Please send your comments to: SAA, 650 "J" Street, Suite 205, Lincoln, NE 68508.*

## ILL WILL

Continued from page 3

### HOW TO AVOID ILL WILL

Just bringing up the subject of money is sometimes taken as an ugly sign of a lack of trust. If this is true in your household, rest assured that you aren't the first stepfamily to initially split along biological lines during the search for solutions to financial strains.

It is best to talk openly about inheritances within your family, and to tell the children what you're planning. It is better to face any surprises and disappointments and anger directly in front of your heirs or (as the case may be) non-heirs, so that there are no false hopes or bad feelings later on.

Since current laws exclude stepfamily members in some inheritances, it is important to specifically name all stepchildren in your will whom you are making beneficiaries to ensure they receive their share.

If you are not including your stepchildren in the will, put this in writing as well so that they at least receive recognition of their existence in your life. You might write something such as "Despite my love and affection for these children, I do not include them in my will."

Update your will at regular intervals. Situations change, particularly in remarriages, and new stepchildren whom you would like to include could lose if you don't mention their existence and their names in the will.

When stepchildren are involved, find a neutral lawyer and ask non-family trustee to negotiate your will. □

*Reprinted courtesy of the Boston Globe.*

# VISTA Update

Susan Jensen

**Editor's Note:** Last August, Susan Jensen joined the SAA office as an Americorps\*VISTA Member. Her primary role was to help us identify and implement ways we can best support and develop our chapters. The VISTA grant only allowed for one year of service, and Susan will be leaving SAA this month. Following are her conclusions and suggestions for the chapter program. We would like to thank Susan for all of her hard work and dedication to SAA. She will be missed.

**A**s my VISTA year comes to a close, I would like to write a few lines to reflect and summarize the research I have been conducting the past ten months.

Throughout my year of service, I have focused on researching the specific support needs for SAA chapters. This process has proven very informative as we have identified various factors that enable and enhance a chapter's success. We were also able to recognize factors that inhibited a chapter's success. Our findings strongly indicate that chapters that have an affiliation or sponsorship with a community organization tend to be more successful in providing education and support services to stepfamilies in their area. We have found that these chapters have a much stronger base from which to draw resources and to build networks within their communities.

Not only does an organizational affiliate aide in

building resources, it can also act as a solution to chapter burnout. Many chapters we surveyed were experiencing burnout because all the responsibility fell on the sole volunteer chapter leader. Chapters that are currently affiliated with a community organization, are able to delegate responsibility and therefore do not experience the same depth of burnout.

Our research also shows that financial problems plague many chapters. The majority of chapters do not have the time or effort to do fundraising activities. We have seen that chapters affiliated with other organizations, do not experience the same level of financial difficulties as non-affiliated chapters. Their sponsors or affiliates help with the expenses of starting and maintaining a chapter.

For these and many other reasons, the direction for the future may lie in building a network of organizational affiliates in which SAA chapters will find numerous resources and benefits.

This issue was discussed at the April Board Meeting in Salt Lake City. An ad hoc committee was established on which board members Jean McBride, Brent Scharman, Robert Klopfer, Kay Pasley and Larry Kallemeyn will serve. In the coming months, the committee will work to explore the possibility of creating this organizational affiliate network. □

## We Care About What You Think!

**T**he Stepfamily Association of America depends on you, our constituents, for support in a variety of areas. One of the areas that has previously been neglected is your opinion on what is happening in our association. The *Stepfamilies Quarterly* is the best arena for this kind of dialogue between the national office and our readers. Therefore, the next issue of *Stepfamilies* will contain our new feature, **Reader's Response**.

For this column to be a success, however, we need your participation! In every issue, we will ask for your opinion on a specific article regarding current information or trends concerning stepfamilies. In the following issue, we will print all, or portions of, your responses. Submission of letters will imply consent to print unless otherwise stated.

Our **Reader's Response** article for this issue is *VISTA Update*, printed above. Please tell us your thoughts on the proposed changes to our current chapter system. Responses to this article should be received no later than September 1, 1997. **We Care About What You Think!**

Please submit written responses to:

**Reader's Response**  
*Stepfamilies Quarterly*  
650 J Street, Suite 205  
Lincoln, NE 68508

## Inclusion/Exclusion Issues in Stepfamilies

Helen W. Coale, LCSW, LMFT

### LOSS AS A FACTOR IN EXCLUSION/INCLUSION PROBLEMS IN STEPFAMILIES

**O**ne way of understanding some of the problems which stepfamilies present is in terms of inclusion. Because stepfamilies are born of loss, inclusion can be a powerful issue that underlies presenting symptomatology. Loss of actual family members through death, loss of hopes and dreams through divorce, loss of important roles through changes in sibling order, loss of routines and patterns of family life – all create changes in regard to who is in the family and who is out, both physically and psychologically.

A noncustodial father is still in but he's in in a different way than when he was married to the children's mother. Whereas a new spouse is physically included but may feel quite emotionally excluded from his or her stepchildren. The children are in but their sibling order may have changed in the creation of a new stepfamily unit. This can create for them a loss of status and privilege.

### EXCLUSION AND INCLUSION FANTASIES

Oftentimes, unrealistic expectations or wishes for a return to old realities color the ways in which family members in a stepfamily are included or excluded. The stepchild who is still grieving the loss of his parents' marriage may not be very interested in including his parent's new spouse in the stepfamily. The newcomer to a single parent headed household may frequently fantasize about what life would be like without the spouse's children in the picture. The remarried parent may sometimes wish that everyone in the new stepfamily would disappear and leave him in peace.

The fact that stepfamilies constantly shift memberships between two or more households can sometimes exacerbate each family member's secretive – or expressly proclaimed – wish to exclude some members of the family from the inner circle. Relief that children are finally going back to their custodial parent after an extended visit, that a stepparent is out of town, that an ex-spouse has moved to Australia, that a hypervigilant custodial parent finally stops calling three times a day when the children are visiting the other parent – these and other

feelings of relief occur in a frame of exclusion.

Sometimes the fantasy that the unwanted member of a family would simply disappear in a kind of permanent exclusion from the family unit begins to dictate behavior in the stepfamily. It then becomes an issue that colors everything else and, therefore, must be addressed before other issues can be resolved.

As with exclusion fantasies, unrealistic inclusion fantasies may color the nature of family life and must be addressed.

### CLINICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF INCLUSION/EXCLUSION PROBLEMS

#### Struggles for Power and Control

Members of stepfamilies may deal with inclusion/exclusion problems by struggling to control reality to fit with their fantasies. The stepparent may try to make the stepchildren love her (when there has not been sufficient time for love to blossom). The parent may withdraw love and affection from his spouse out of his anger that she is not showering his children with affection. A child may become oppositional and/or symptomatic as a way of gaining attention when he feels excluded from his parent's new marriage. The ex-spouse may suddenly file legal papers to modify child support out of his resentment with having to share his children with a new stepfather.

Therapists often help families negotiate agreements regarding structure and tasks in the stepfamily and find that new problems simply pop up elsewhere. This is a good clue that the content of structure and tasks is not the issue – that something more pervasive is in operation. Inclusion/exclusion feelings are frequently the problem.

Wishes to be included and feelings of being excluded are a good place to start. Questions such as "Who is closest to whom?", "To whom would you like to be closer?", "Who feels the furthest away from you?", "With whom do you think (another family member) would like to be closer or more distant?", and "How has the formation of the stepfamily made you feel closer to or more distant from other family members?" are good openers for such a discussion. The family's responses to such questions help the therapist formulate a kind of inclusion/exclusion map of the family.

Continued on page 7

Wishes to be excluded or to exclude someone else are usually more difficult to address because these are frequently secretive. The stepmother who wishes her stepchildren would disappear from the face of the earth may feel ashamed or fearful of expressing this. Instead, she expresses it through trying to control the amount of money her husband spends on the children, the frequency of phone calls with his ex-wife, and the amount of time and attention he devotes to his "former" family. The stepchild who wishes her stepfather would go away and never come back may not state this directly but may demonstrate it by spending all of her time in her room or by rebelling against anything the stepfather asks her to do. Questions which normalize exclusion fantasies can sometimes give relief – "What kinds of normal fantasies have you had that everything would revert back to the way it used to be before the divorce and remarriage?", "How often do you wish that (stepchild, stepparent, ex-spouse) would vaporize into thin air and leave you alone?", "Do you feel that your wishes for your stepchildren to disappear are similar to what most stepparents feel or are they more intense?"

## INTIMACY PROBLEMS

Struggles to control reality to fit with unrealistic inclusion or exclusion fantasies and feelings interfere with the intimacy that could develop in the presence of more reality-based expectations. If a stepparent feels supported, for example, by her spouse in her struggle to learn to love his children, she is more likely to feel close to them than if he pushes her to behave lovingly when she feels awkward and resentful in doing so. A child who is given permission to take her time in adjusting to the presence of a stepparent in her life is more likely to develop positive feelings for that stepparent than is a child who is "required" to act (and feel) loving. Feelings are simply not malleable to coercion.

When stepfamilies have been together for many years and their members are persistently hostile and distant from one another, it suggests that there have been power struggles over inclusion/exclusion issues that have never been resolved. This closes off all of the normal avenues for the development of intimacy and must be addressed in the therapy before any closeness is likely to develop. "Have you ever secretly liked your stepparent but didn't know how to express this feeling as long as you felt you were required to love him?" "How could you get closer to your stepchildren without the sense that your spouse has "won" in his constant pressure to force you to love them?" "Do you think you and your wife could have more intimate time together if you stopped monitoring time she spends with the children?"

## CASE EXAMPLE

Jordan and Judy had been married nine years when they first presented for therapy. Jordan had been married twice before, with children from each marriage, and Judy once before with a son from her first marriage. Together, they had one son. Shortly after the marriage, Judy became overwhelmed with Jordan's attachment to his ex-wives and his children. She resented the emotional and financial energy Jordan poured into them and felt very much the outsider. The more she complained to Jordan, the more he maintained his connections to his ex-wives and children in his own struggle to maintain power and control.

Once Jordan and Judy had a son of their own, Judy retaliated by doing everything she could to shut Jordan out from his relationship with their son. The more she shut Jordan out, the more he attended to his ex-wives and children and the more excluded she felt. A vicious cycle was created in which everybody felt shut out. Eventually, Jordan's and Judy's son, Jason, became a major player in the drama, developing extreme behavior problems in school as a way of forcing his parents to get together in order to deal with him.

It was in response to this crisis that the family sought help. Initially, I tried to help Jordan and Judy arrive at some basic agreements for the management of their son's problems. This yielded temporary solutions but another issue quickly arose. Judy was furious with Jordan for the financial drain on the family caused by his excessive discretionary giving to his children by previous marriages. She complained that she had to scrimp and save in order to support his ex-wives and children. Once again, I facilitated some negotiations between the couple regarding the discretionary monies which Jordan allocated to his other families. As soon as this was settled, Judy's next complaint was that Jordan went on business trips and entertained customers in ways in which he would never conceive of entertaining her.

At this point, I asked Judy if she had ever felt included in Jordan's life and she tearfully said that she had always felt like an outsider. She had tried to make Jordan include her by trying to control the ways in which he related to his former families and then, when this failed, through the ways in which he conducted his business affairs. Nothing had worked. The harder she tried to make him include her, the more excluded she felt. Jordan then talked about the ways in which he had felt excluded from the present family as Judy undermined his relationship with his son. Both were in tears.

It was out of this discussion – and ones like it – that changes began to occur. As each heard the exclusion feelings of the other and realized that they had both suffered

Continued on page 8

## Central Iowa Chapter

Jacci Dewdney

**A** chapter in its infancy, the Central Iowa Chapter has been providing education and support to Iowa stepfamilies since July 1996.

The chapter provides services to stepfamilies through monthly support group meetings, formal presentations, stepfamily workshops, and presentations to employee groups of area employers. Twenty-eight stepfamily adults have attended support group meetings during the past year.

The Central Iowa Chapter currently has two sponsors. Iowa Health Systems, a state-wide hospital organization, and Heritage Estates Publishing, a small desktop publishing company. When the Iowa Health System was contacted, it was clear that both the chapter and the hospital could benefit from the affiliation. The hospital was interested in presenting themselves as more of a community resource to empower families and improve their outreach efforts.

The chapter also reaps numerous benefits. The hospital not only provides adequate meeting space, but also a neutral meeting space for stepparents. In addition, the hospital acts as a financial resource for the chapter's community outreach, advertising, and cosponsoring of local conferences to educate and increase public awareness. Finally, the affiliation with the Iowa Health System gives the chapter access to mental health professionals in the area.

### SECOND WIFE

by Myrtle Archer

Tell me of your first wife, Love,  
Let us stand beside her grave,  
In silence, reverent and brave,  
Honoring the care of years.  
How she fed you, stopped your tears.  
Fired your love to keep it warm  
For me.  
Had these children I can love  
And make them too a part of me.  
I will celebrate your love,  
I will hug him far from tears.  
Tell me of your first wife, Love,  
We will honor her lost years.

Currently, one support group meets monthly at Blank Children's Hospital in Des Moines. Marriage and Family Therapists and other local professionals have generously donated time to share information with group members. On alternating months, the group follows a self-help discussion format.

Other activities of the chapter include mailings to local therapists and social service agencies, development of a chapter brochure, and participation in a local talk radio program.

Plans are currently underway to expand support group meetings and to organize local workshops for adults and children for the Fall of 1997. Beginning July 1997 the chapter will have a column in the recently launched TRANSITIONS newsletter, a local newsletter for single parent families and stepfamilies. □

## INCLUSION/EXCLUSION ISSUES

Continued from page 7

in similar ways, they were able to negotiate new arrangements in their relationship which facilitated more inclusion, more intimacy. Prior to this understanding, every negotiation simply had occurred in an unchanged context of exclusion.

### SUMMARY

Inclusion/exclusion issues frequently are the core of problematic struggles for power and control and for intimacy problems which stepfamilies bring to therapists. If straightforward negotiations of structure and task prove futile in the therapeutic work, it is often useful to move straight to questions about inclusion and exclusion. When inclusion/exclusion problems are addressed, negotiations about power and control and about intimacy can reach resolution. □

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## BOARD BIO

### Margorie Engel



**B**oard Member and incoming president, Margorie Engel, is quite the renaissance woman. Among other things, she is an author, speaker and media consultant about successful transitions through divorce and remarriage. Margorie has a 32 year business career, an MA in education, an MBA, and is a Ph.D. candidate in Law, Policy and Society specializing in the legal and financial issues of remarriage. Many of you may remember her as the author of last spring's questionnaire on "The Financial Security of Women in Remarriages" - watch for the results this coming winter.

In her SAA role as Chair of Educational Resources, Margorie has also provided us with book reviews for the quarterly STEPFAMILIES newsletter. Previously pub-

lished books include *The Divorce Decisions Workbook*, *Divorce Help Sourcebook*, and *Weddings for Complicated Families*. She's currently working on the manuscript for a book about stepfamily decisions.

Margorie, a native of Maryland, is also a wife, mother, stepmother, and stepgrandmother who now lives in Boston. When she isn't appearing as an expert for national television programs or traveling for Stepfamily Association activities, Margorie and her husband, Steve, can be found sailing throughout the New England waterways, sightseeing overseas, or "doing parenting and grandparenting things with five daughters, four granddaughters, and one grandson." □



## STEP WRITE UP

by Rick Harper, M.F.C.C.

Dear SWU,

I am 34 years old and have recently become involved with Eric, age 42. Eric has two children, Kimberly age twelve and David age six, from his previous marriage. Eric has physical custody and shares legal custody with their mother, Pamela, who has the children on alternating weekends. I met Pamela briefly when she picked up the children on two or three occasions.

The problem is this. A couple of months ago Eric and Pamela agreed that the children would spend an extra two days with their mother, extending their weekend due to Eric's upcoming business trip. Now Pamela is saying she cannot handle the children for four days and therefore Eric must make other arrangements less than a week before he leaves. Should I volunteer?

I want to help Eric, but I don't know the children very well. I can't understand why Pamela changes her mind at the last minute or "can't handle the children" for four days. I feel as if my involvement with Eric puts me in the position of solving their problems.

Please advise  
Joan

DEAR JOAN,

No! Often, the best help one can provide is self restraint. This is Eric and Pamela's problem. It's bad enough to have the children in the middle. Adding yourself and your own issues will only complicate matters further. Eric, Pamela and their children will benefit most from learning to solve their own problems. Your concern and support is enough. Taking sides and making quick judgments is seldom helpful.

If your "involvement" with Eric or anyone else makes you feel like you must solve their problems, you may benefit from exploring your need to rescue others and your apparent vulnerability to other people's problems. You will help your loved ones most by developing an ability to identify and deal with your own challenges. It is not for you to understand or deal with more than your own feelings.

#### Things to provide, if asked:

- An empathic ear to any or all, from the supportive sidelines
- Suggest qualified child care i.e. grandparents, aunts, uncles etc.
- Referral to Family counseling where appropriate

Children learn to cope by having mature role models around them, especially during times of stress and conflict.

Finally, if this family cannot deal with this sort of problem without generating a major crisis, rethink your "involvement."

## How Does Remarriage Affect the Co-parenting of Former Spouses?

**M**ore and more we are seeing an interest in helping divorced parents work cooperatively on behalf of their children to develop a positive “coparental” relationship. Emily and John Visser (1989) have suggested that developing a “parenting coalition” is a more accurate way to describe the desired relationship between former spouses when a remarriage occurs and more than two adults are attempting to parent a child. Much of the literature on this topic has suggested that when a remarriage of one or both parents occurs, the cooperative parenting patterns and roles that were established following divorce are disrupted because of the addition of a new spouse who also becomes a stepparent. The rules that work for the postdivorce couple often need to be revisited or defined in the face of the changes that accompany remarriage.

While we have a good deal of information on the relationship between former spouses after divorce, such as how they interact and how that interaction affects children, we know little about how the remarriage of one or both of those parents affects the established patterns of parenting. What few studies we have suggest that remarriage negatively affects the ability of former spouses to coparent effectively. For example, studies show that remarriage reduces the interaction between former spouses around child rearing concerns (Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987; Ruffin, 1991; Seltzer, 1991), reduces the frequency of visitation between nonresident parents and children (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Seltzer, 1991), and reduces the parent’s satisfaction with parenting (Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987; ruffin, 1991). Research also shows that the negative effects of remarriage are especially true when only the husband is remarried (Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987; Seltzer, 1991; Buehler & Ryan, 1995).

A recent study reported in the *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage* also investigated the effects of remarriage on coparenting, asking whether remarriage was the main influence or whether other factors had greater influence on the relationship between former spouses around parenting issues. More specifically, the authors asked how influential one’s remarriage was on cooperative parenting, parenting satisfaction, and involvement with one’s children above and beyond the effects of visitation, custody, and income. (Visitation, custody, and income are

known to affect coparenting, such that cooperation between former spouses is associated with more frequent visitation by the nonresident parent, joint custody arrangements, and higher levels of income.)

Unlike many of the studies that examined coparenting, Donna Christensen and Kathryn Rettig secured a large, random sample drawn from 10 counties in Minnesota of divorced persons whose marriages ended in 1986. They followed these couples for three years. At that point 28.5% of the women and 38.3% of the men had remarried from the 372 women and 277 men involved in the study. Most of the divorced men and women had one or two children, had been married an average of 10.6 years, and were in the early to mid-30s.

Several aspects of coparenting were examined: sharing of child rearing activities with the other parent, providing support to one another, engaging in conflict, and holding a positive attitude toward the other parent. Also, they asked questions about the parents’ level of satisfaction with parenting, how involved they were with the children, their frequency of visitation, the nature of the custody arrangements, their perceptions of economic adequacy, and their personal well-being.

Their findings showed that men and women saw postdivorce parenting differently. For example, women reported less coparental interaction, support, and conflict with former spouses than did men. Women also perceived their former spouse in a less positive light, but were more satisfied with parenting and more involved in activities with their children than were men. Those who had remarried compared to those who remained single also reported differences. Single parents reported more coparental interaction, support from one’s former spouse, and more positive attitudes toward the other parent than did remarried parents. Remarried men also experienced less parenting satisfaction and lower involvement in their children’s activities than did remarried women.

Although remarriage affected coparenting, frequency of visitation, custody status (sole versus joint), and income were more influential. In other words, just knowing whether a parent had remarried does not sufficiently explain negative postdivorce coparenting experiences.

Continued on page 11



## BOOK REVIEWS

Margorie Engel, M.A., M.B.A.  
President Elect

**F**or a brief period, we were adrift without a lifeline to Patricia Schiff Estess' expertise on stepfamily money matters. Her original book, *Remarriage and Your Money*, has been updated and republished as *Money Advice for Your Successful Remarriage: Handling delicate financial issues with love and understanding* (Betterway Books, 1996, \$14.99).

Our SAA Lincoln office tells me that we receive numerous inquiries about stepfamily money management. Remarried couples at conferences and professional symposiums seek me out to ask for ideas that may help resolve particularly troublesome money matters. If your questions are about college expenses or inheritance, SAA has a tape called *Steps Ahead with Daisy Petals: "They Love Me" (College Expenses); "They Love Me Not" (Inheritance)*. If your questions are about how to divide money within the stepfamily, or how the children fit into the financial picture, the audio tapes *Stepfamily Money Quandaries: One, Two, or Three Pots?* and *Money Challenges with Our Children* may be for you. For most other general stepfamily financial issues, I refer you to *Money Advice*.

This book covers the gamut from preparing prenuptial agreements, consolidating expenses and investments, to handling expenses for the children. While coping with the emotional issues of your new financial situation, reading about the stages of financial trust - (1) Rose-Colored Glasses, (2) Don't-Rock-the-Boat, (3) Lay-It-On-the-Table, (4) Getting-It-Together, and finally, (5) Achieving Stability, can ward off "the crazies." No, you're not the only person having these complex feelings and, yes, you do still love your spouse in spite of uncertainty about this money stuff.

Most financial decisions are meant to be revisited. Circumstances change and what is fair at a point in time may no longer meet personal and family needs later on. Prenuptials are an obvious case in point. *Money Advice* offers ideas about how to amend or negate a prenuptial and even describes the "Anatomy of a Prenuptial - In Stages." Ownership of property and control of household money and expenses also come to mind. We're all familiar with the *One Pot, Two Pots, Three Pots* system. Here you can learn how to put your family's personal spin on this system in a way that allows for adjustments as time goes by.

Does the stepfamily exist that has not sensed at least the possibility of financial danger? When the squeeze arrives and there's not enough money - whether from reduced support for children from a prior marriage, job loss, or illness - Pat Estess can walk you through the cri-

sis with specific and, more important, doable ways to minimize the financial damage.

Of course, not every stepfamily financial crunch arrives through trauma. An exciting arrival, the "Ours" child costs might be an eye-opener. Unless you're experiencing instant adoption, you have some time to plan. "Steps to Take Before or When 'Ours' Arrives" begin on page 106.

Every winter, I receive questions from the media about stepfamily gift-giving and the "caste" system. Unequal gift-giving does occur, most notably involving grandparents and stepgrandparents. Sometimes it is a power game but more often because roles are new and so are the expectations. The author is a finance expert; however, she has heartwarming stories to tell about ingenious techniques to lighten the gift-giving occasions.

This is a book to own. Read it before the wedding and you'll find it an indispensable reference book thereafter. □

## REMARRIAGE & CO-PARENTING

Continued from page 10

Instead, knowing how frequent the nonresident parent visits his/her child and whether parents hold joint custody are important to understanding cooperating parenting behaviors after divorce. This is the key finding of the study. It suggests that the coparenting pattern established prior to one's remarriage is maintained and not disrupted as once thought it would be at least in the early stages of remarriage. □

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## DIRECTOR'S REPORT

By Larry Kallemeyn

**C**hange and our ability to adapt at an increasingly rapid rate seems to be the paramount feature of the time in which we live. Whether the changes we experience are societal, business, or personal in nature, they all impact on our sense of safety and well being.



As adults we seem to find ourselves caught in a never ending cycle. We never seem to be settled into our new routine before the next change is upon us. For some the process is exciting and invigorating, always creating new challenges and opportunities. For others it is frightening with a sense of loss and confusion, and yet for others it is absolutely debilitating and emotionally devastating.

The impact on our children's lives is generally based on how well the adults in their lives have responded. It is therefore imperative we continue to strive and find ways to successfully deal with the changes we experience.

The impact of divorce and remarriage on children is great and is a change which is occurring with increasing frequency. It is projected that by the year 2010, there will be more families created by remarriage than any other type of family in the United States.

SAA is committed to finding more ways of supporting and strengthening stepfamilies in our society. We truly appreciate your involvement and support of SAA and we sincerely hope our efforts have provided you the additional information or support needed to help you adjust to the changes in your lives.

### From the Underside

*by Bonnie Yenerall*

Struggles within,  
struggles without  
It's not the same -  
There is no doubt

Stepfamilies don't blend  
They collide  
But stick around long enough  
It's worth the ride

To "the kids" be a friend,  
An uncle or aunt  
Trying to be a mom or dad?  
The answer is CAN'T.

Cut out the criticisms,  
Advice or rules -  
Let the BIO parent  
Use all their tools

Relax, just listen,  
Support and play  
So that LOVE with your partner  
Is there to stay.

## ANNOUNCEMENT OF PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

The next SAA Professional Training Institute, offering Levels I and II, is tentatively scheduled for **October 31 and November 1st in Philadelphia.** If you have any questions or wish to register, please call the national office at

**1-800-735-0329.**

Watch for further details!

## Collections of SAA's best articles and research findings

**F** Over the past several years SAA has been pleased to publish many excellent articles and research findings on various aspects of step-family life within its quarterly publication Stepfamilies. These have included articles by many of the top researchers and scholars in the field as well as more personal articles written by stepfamily members from across the country.

We are pleased to announce that we are again making available collections of SAA's best articles and findings in the areas of Stepparenting, Stepmotherhood, Stepchildren, Grandparent Relations, Stepfamily Research, and Counseling Stepfamilies.

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- Yours, Mine and You've Got To Be Kidding! – Linda Plahitko-Gosnell
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**P**lan to have family meetings at least once a month or, if problems arise, more often. Establish guidelines to follow.

**E**ducate Yourself! Read! Participate in stepfamily workshops and SAA chapter support meetings.

**T**ime alone as a couple is valuable. Spend at least 20 minutes of relaxed time alone with each other every day.

**S**trengthen the couple relationship. Use good positive communication skills. Develop leadership as a couple. Fight fairly!

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