

Special Dads On A Special Day

Single fathers offer special bonds as they guide and prepare their children for the future

On several weekends, the two Indians wore identical tan leather vests they had hand-stitched while sitting for hours in the middle of the den floor one Saturday afternoon. The elder's large hands had helped their smaller counterparts thread thick string over the often unclear sewing pattern—a foreshadowing of his guidance of her through life.

As the years went by, the calf-colored vests gradually brightened with the addition of colorful cloth patches and embossed leather ones that were symbolic of Lone Pine's and Little Leaf's miniature adventures together in the wilderness of Camp Carter—the gathering site for members of the father-daughter organization called Indian Princesses.

Although Little Leaf outgrew the vest and officially became too old at age 8 for her and daddy to participate, an invisible, everlasting bond had been born out of marshmallows around a campfire, bacon and eggs that ended up on the floor, canoe races, archery lessons, surprise bees in recently opened Coke cans and moral lessons derived from Native American tribal lore.

Twenty years later, Lone Pine and Little Leaf are still as one.

For the 1970s, a father who taught his child how to sew or cook was rare, at best. Parental roles were distinct and stereotyped, placing the mother as the primary caretaker and the father as the breadwinner regardless of the spouses' marital arrangement.

Recent attention given to "dead-beat dads," or those fathers who have failed to pay child support, may have temporarily reinforced this antiquated role, but the father figure continues to evolve both socially and legally.

As the 80s will be remembered for the rise of the SuperMom, the 90s will likely be tagged as the birth of the house-cleaning, dinner-cooking, office-working SuperDad.

Social Expectations and Role Playing

With the help of magazines, movies, and television, fathers are no longer viewed merely as a means of financial support, said James A. Cook, the first president of the National Congress for Men and the creator of the Joint Custody Association.

"It's gradually becoming fashionable" for fathers to be heavily involved in the lives of their children,

he said, whether as sole custodians or as active participants in their children's daily activities.

Although the courts did not grant him custody of any of his five children, Michael Geanoulis, a member of the Board of Directors for the National Congress for Fathers and Children, became the sole caretaker of his daughter Catherine when she was 12.

After the divorce, "the transition (to sole fatherhood) was a little bit painful," Geanoulis said. For example, he said he had to adjust his thinking, alter his social/dating life and quit his job to find one that gave him more flexibility.

"There was (also) a certain amount of neglect with the house," Geanoulis said. "Every once in a while I would get down on my hands and knees in the bathroom with a bucket. I guess the housekeeping wasn't all that great," he said. As for the cooking, Geanoulis said meals were generally not a problem, although he "wasn't used to getting up in the morning to make sandwiches." "I used the crock pot and timer a lot. 'Got good at throwing things together' and reading the directions on boxes," he said, adding that any adjustments he made were well worth the relationship he formed with his daughter Cathy.

Cathy is 36 and married, but continues to take overseas vacations with her dad.

According to statistics published by the Joint Custody Association, the number of single dads is estimated at about 1.2 million nationwide, with the number of sole custodian, never-married fathers having increased dramatically from 32,000 in 1970 to 488,000 in 1990.

Cook said the trend toward greater father involvement is likely to continue, whether in the form of legal custody or through increased daily interaction with the child, because people in their twenties and thirties have a more egalitarian attitude about childcare than the older generations.

As the notion that mothers are more important to child development diminishes, it should become more socially acceptable for fathers to be

the primary caretakers, Geanoulis agreed. In fact, there are already small signs that society has begun acclimating to the expansion of paternal roles. For instance, Ed Wagner, a CPA in New Hampshire, said he has seen diaper changing stations in men's restrooms at airports and in at least one department store—a subtle

traits worth getting across and worth children getting to know." For instance, instead of constantly "mothering" his daughter, Wagner began teaching her to do things for herself with confidence when she was only 5. "One time we were at McDonald's, and she wanted another cheeseburger," Wagner said. "So I told her to get in line and get it herself, that I was going to be right here" and was not going anywhere. Today, he said, she doesn't have the fear of doing things by herself that she might otherwise have had.

Changing laws

New legislation is also expected to have a dramatic effect on the fu-

take custody of younger, pre-school children.

Austin resident Eric Anderson, the sole custodian of his 11-year-old son Brandon, said he has been a victim of these cultural biases both in society and in the courtroom during the late 80s and early 90s. Through his two-year custody battle, Anderson said the courts had psychologists assess his personality and capabilities before making their decision. The judges even ran home social studies and conducted other investigations that would not have been necessary, in their eyes, had he been a woman, he said.

Socially, Anderson and numerous other single-parent men said they were viewed with skepticism. Parents were fearful of allowing their children to spend the night with my son, Anderson said, because they held on to the attitude that if I was a single father, then something must be wrong with me. However, Warshak's research shows there to be no significant difference regarding either gender's ability as a parent.

As a single parent Anderson has found that "the role of the nurturer is something that's completely gender neutral" and that the ability to give hugs and kisses is not reserved for women. The main difference he sees is that "boys not raised with fathers don't realize that being a man is not a machismo kind of thing...so they develop an idea of manhood that is not what manhood is about."

While the selection of men interviewed differed slightly in their opinions on the best way to raise a child and in their perceptions of what constitutes "proper" male and female roles, they all agreed on one thing: The constant presence of both the mother and father is in the best interest of the children. But when this is not possible, fathers welcome single parenthood as opposed to not being around to see their sons and daughters grow up.

This article is dedicated to John Gray who, in his own way, has been a single father as his Indian name suggests.



change that signifies social awareness of the number of fathers involved with routine childcare rather than the conventional babysitter-style weekend entertainment.

"I try to do normal day-to-day events (with my daughter) as opposed to being a Disneyland Dad," Wagner said. Because Wagner wanted his daughter to experience real life situations with him rather than to think of weekends as mini-vacations, Wagner said he often took her to work with him on Saturday mornings during tax season and cooked meals with her almost daily.

Similarly, Jesse Velazquez, a single dad who is in charge of Monday night support groups for Parent's Without Partners in Austin, said his biggest goals are to teach his 3- and 5-year-old sons the difference between reality and fiction and to provide them with the ability to "show their feelings and emotions, to be able to cry, and to be able to tell people they love them."

Unlike Velazquez, single dads usually find it difficult to assume the emotive role associated with females. But Cook said stereotypical sex roles do not necessarily have to disappear when the father becomes the sole caretaker.

"Men don't need to be mothers," Cook said. "Innately a man has

ture of single parent households, particularly with regard to father rights," said Richard Warshak, a clinical professor at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center and author of "The Custody Revolution." The Joint Custody Association estimates that the number of single-parent families headed by men will increase by 42 percent between 1988 and 2000—an increase that is presumed to be the largest percentage change predicted for the immediate future of the family structure.

About 42 states currently have some form of shared parenting laws, Warshak said, adding that in September 1995, Texas passed a new law making joint custody the presumption in divorce cases.

However, courts have not always been willing to recognize men as capable caretakers, and lawyers have often discouraged their male clients. Warshak calls this an integral part of the "weeding out process" the legal system has used to more easily ensure maternal custody. Two main reasons for this legal bias have been cited by Cook. First, judges have incorrectly assumed that fathers are incapable of providing children with the type of overt affection that is typically associated with mothers. Second, courts unfairly question the intentions of a father who wishes to

Local Support Groups for Single Fathers:

Parents Without Partners is an international organization that was formed in New York in the 1950s to help single men and women to cope with divorce and child-rearing. For information, call Gerri Kamen at 335-9700.

The Father's Hotline in Austin, sponsored by the Men's Health Network in Washington, D.C., is the central location for this national support group. For information or assistance, call 472-3237 (DADS).

The Austin Men's Center is Austin's local organization created specifically for helping men with their unique problems. Call 477-9595 for counseling or other information.