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Section C

RELATIONSHIPS

Going it alone as a father

More dads in the Dallas area struggle to rear their children singlehandedly

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When 10-year-old Rachael Bruno needs help fixing her hair in the morning, she asks her father, Frank. When there is laundry to be done or meals to be made in the Bruno home, Frank does it. Rides to movies, car pools, shopping? Who metes out the punishment and provides parental love? Who pays the bills?

"It's been kind of rough sometimes," says Bruno, 45, who also has two teen-age children. "It's been all on my shoulders."

Bruno is one of almost 900,000 American fathers who head single-parent families today, an increase of 127 percent since 1970, according to U.S. Census figures. More than 1 million children are now being

raised by single fathers.

In the Dallas area, 10,800 fathers head single-parent families, and in Texas, the number is 44,886, according to 1980 Census figures. By comparison, almost 75,500 women head single-parent families in the Dallas area; the figure is 281,383 statewide.

The circumstances that turn fathers into single parents vary: Some are divorced and got custody in an uncontested case, some fought bitter custody battles with ex-wives, some are widowers, some are separated. Others are raising children from two different marriages. But all single fathers share the fact that they are the ones responsible for feeding, clothing, educating and loving their children.

And this has resulted in varied and radical changes for these men: Many have lowered their career expectations, discovered new emotions and

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Some 10,800 Dallas-area fathers rear children without 'mom'

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stresses, and learned how to keep house.

Bruno has had custody of his children for eight years; seven of those years were spent in a second marriage that swelled the household to six children and two adults. Now, following a divorce, Bruno and his kids are on their own again.

"The kids and I are in better shape now than ever," says Bruno, who is a math teacher at Wylie High School. "The kids are older now. It's more of a positive attitude. . . ."

A loud buzzer echoes through the Plano duplex, interrupting Bruno. He gets up from the couch and turns off the clothes dryer.

"One of the roughest parts about being a single parent without the real mother around is (the children) don't have the benefit of both parents being here and each of you supporting the other," Bruno says after returning. "That's the biggest problem I've had."

"And that's what usually happens, the single parent that has the kids has all the responsibility with no help."

Melody Fortenberry, a Dallas clinical psychologist who specializes in single parents and divorced families, says that most single fathers have no male role models for household chores, preparing meals and seeing that their kids are dressed properly.

"Women have the models," says Fortenberry. "It's automatic, it's unconscious. For single fathers, it's brand new."

And often difficult. Jude Plauche knows how hard it is. When he married for the second time five years ago, his wife had custody of her 2-year-old daughter from a previous marriage. The couple had two children of their own before separating four months ago. Now, Plauche is taking care of three children under 7 years of age. Plauche, 31, lives in Arlington, works in North Dallas and has his kids in a Bedford day-care center. His day normally lasts from 5 a.m. until 11 p.m.

"When we first started this out, I didn't even know where the day-care center was," says Plauche, who is an independent systems analyst. "I had to start learning how to fold clothes and even take care of my

stuff. (My wife) had been doing everything."

Her absence has not only given Plauche a chance to know the children better, but he also has learned just how difficult being a single parent can be.

"There's no advantage to keeping kids (by yourself) other than you get to know them better," he says. "You get to appreciate what your wife is doing. If we were to get back together, this will have been the best thing that could have happened to me in a hard kind of way."

"It's not overwhelming, but it's big. It's a lot of responsibility. It will

make me make sure that I put my job second or third to everything else. It's a completely different perspective on the way I view things."

For instance, Plauche says, he usually battles traffic for an hour to pick up the kids and reach home at 6:30 p.m. Then he makes dinner and gets the kids ready for bed. Before the separation, his wife prepared the meal and tucked the children in bed.

After coming home, "it's really hard to get into it and you don't have that much time to go make a great big giant meal because pretty soon it's time for them to go to bed," Plauche says. "You get them all seated and then they say, 'I don't want it,' so one gets something and one gets something else. I make a lot of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. The food bill has probably been cut in one-fourth."

Dr. Richard Warshak is a Dallas clinical psychologist, who, along with Dr. John Santrock of the University of Texas at Dallas, released a

major study on the effects of single fathers on children in 1979. Warshak says the most difficult feat for single fathers is juggling their responsibilities for the children and their jobs.

Granted, that is the most difficult feat for single mothers, as well. But women have been conditioned to put family first, and men have been conditioned to believe that jobs are their highest priority. Single fathers, says Warshak, have had to change that view and put fatherhood first. Employers "are not used to scheduling around men's responsibilities at home," adds Warshak, who is on the faculty of the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School.

A 1982 study of 1,136 single fathers by a University of Maryland researcher showed that they went through 2,158 job changes in the year after gaining custody of their children — apparently to enable them to have more time at home.

Nine years ago, Al Pugh, 39,

didn't have to change jobs in order to singlehandedly raise his son, Toby, who was 3 at the time. But when asking permission to leave work early to pick Toby up from day care, he did endure questions from employers such as, "Why doesn't his mother do that?"

"Nine years ago, guys didn't have their sons," says Pugh, whose former wife lives in Fort Worth and keeps Toby for several weeks each summer. "I've had jobs where I've worked for an employer and had to take off work to take the kid to the doctor. It's something that men don't do. It's almost not accepted. And the question comes along: 'Can't you get someone to take care of him?' and the answer is: 'He's my kid. Nobody else is supposed to take care of him.'"

Two years ago, Pugh solved the problem by going into business for himself. As a CPA, he is able to set his own hours, and at times, work out of his North Richland Hills home.

Aside from that, Pugh says single fatherhood has not affected his lifestyle. He has remained active in his own outside activities and in Toby's, going so far as to take his son to Jaycee meetings and also serve as a "den mother" for Toby's Cub Scout group. Even Pugh's dating has become a family affair. Recently, when a 3½-year relationship ended, Pugh says his son approached him and told him to cheer up.

"It's no big deal," Pugh recalls Toby saying to him. "We've done it before, we can do it again."

Pugh says that he frequently calls friends who are single mothers and asks for advice when Toby is sick or just to "hoot and holler" about parental problems. It's important for single fathers to get emotional support, he says, because many times "you just don't know the right thing to do."

Still, he says, "it is not automatic

that a woman can take care of a kid better than a guy can, no matter how old the kid is. I've taken care of him when he's sick, when he's happy, when he's sad, when he's afraid, when he's excited, when he's won and when he's lost.

"I don't think a woman could do a better job (just) because she's a woman. I'm sure there are women who could have done a better job, but not because they are women."

For Bill Wallace of Carrollton, the 1984 death of his ex-wife placed him in a position he'd never even considered: being both mother and father to his 12-year-old son.

"I think like a father and I have to think like a mother, too, and that

hasn't happened," says Wallace, 50, owner of Omicron Electronics. "I know that when you have a kid, you assume the responsibility some day that you might have to be both a mother and father to the child. I never thought it would happen to me."

After Wallace and his wife divorced in 1977, he was a weekend father for the next seven years. "I was the entertainment committee, the fun chairman, you name it," he says. "On weekends we just had a good time."

"Now, living together every day, day in and day out, it's changed some. It's an added stress that I wasn't really prepared for."