

# The Dallas Morning News

Sunday, June 16, 1991 – Cover Story – Today Section

By Toni Y. Joseph

Staff Writer of The Dallas Morning News

Eddie Boggs, Steven Meeks and Amado Reyna will smile when they open handmade or store-bought cards today. The gift they really want, though, is a couple of hours to themselves.

For these men, Father's Day is every day.

They are three of the nation's 1.4 million single fathers. Nobody knows just how many single fathers are in the Dallas area, but about half of the 2,000 members of the local chapter of Parents Without Partners are male.

Although men represent only 4 percent of single-parent households nationwide, their numbers doubled between 1980 and 1990.

"As women have become more equal in the workforce, men have become more equal at home," says Harvey Oshman, a Dallas clinical psychologist.

**"It flies in the face of stereotypes," says Richard Warshak, an associate professor at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center who is completing a book about single fathers. "But fathers can do as good a job of raising children as mothers."**

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Najja Meeks, 9, knows her family is different.

"We're vegetarians," she says. "We don't wear shoes inside."

She also has lived alone with her father since she was 4.

A customer service representative for Federal Express, Mr. Meeks takes Najja to many cultural events, especially concerts.

"Most places I go, she can go," he says. "She's been going to the Caravan of Dreams since it opened. She's met everyone from Billy Eckstine to Lou Rawls."

The Meekses' secluded, hilltop house in East Oak Cliff reflects their eclectic interests. He is an activist, a jazz  
Please see DADS on Page 4F.



*Parenthood is never easy, but for these single fathers it's a round-the-clock job*

# Dads who meet the singular d

Continued from Page 1F.

musician and a composer. She likes to dance and color.

Father and daughter seem at home among the clutter of old furniture, pets and woodwind instruments. Mr. Meeks, 37, listens as Najja recites the speech she'll deliver at her third-grade graduation ceremony. A half-dozen cats laze outside on the porch, beneath the glider.

"I love Daddy," says Najja. "He lets my friends come over. He lets me go over to my friends' houses. I just wish I could make him a little kid."

At the back of their house, a shiny grand piano practically fills a room of its own. Primitive and abstract African-American paintings line the walls; abstract figures, sculptures and artifacts decorate the house.

Mr. Meeks, who was awarded custody of Najja in 1988, hopes the art will help transform her childhood into a series of mellow memories.

"I had a real good childhood," he says. "I want to be able to give her everything my parents gave me and more . . . I make sure she saves ticket stubs, articles and pictures in a scrapbook so she'll be able to say, 'This is what I've done in my life.'"

Mr. Meeks stretches, then rises to set up an ironing board in the tiny dining room.

"We try to have about a week's worth of clothes ready," he explains. "We don't always make that goal."

Najja presses a ruffled pink graduation dress under her father's watchful eye. The garment fails inspection, and Mr. Meeks tries to iron out the more stubborn wrinkles.

"Daddy, some people go to school without ironing their clothes," Najja says.

"Not at graduation," he says, dropping into the rocker and shutting his eyes. "Parenthood is time-consuming, but I love it."

Father and daughter are affectionate; they hold hands, giggle and hug. Mr. Meeks says his friends think Najja is too clingy.

Her mother, Shelia Maxwell of

and their ability to raise children.

"I'm being told that men are learning how to nurture," says Ms. Keaton. "I see them spending more time with their children. I see them talking more. But I don't see much nurturing. Steven and men like him may be able to turn this whole thing around."

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When you're raising a teen-ager, you need something to remind you that you're doing the right things. The license-plate frame on Eddie Boggs' pickup truck does just that: "Super Dad," it reads.

But sometimes, says his 15-year-old son, Jason, plain "Dad" would be more fitting.

"He's strict," says Jason, twisting an arm around to point to the middle of his back. "I used to have hair down to here. He made me cut it off. My dad's kind of old-fashioned."

"I am," Mr. Boggs agrees.

End of discussion.

A TV provides the only light in the family room in the pair's Garland home. The room is filled with automobile posters, a big bar, worn wood furniture and various trophies.

Father and son take a minute to share their versions of a weekend disagreement. It seems that Mr. Boggs demanded a meeting with and a handwritten note from the parents of a friend who hosted an end-of-school party. The note was to include a telephone number where the parents could be reached during the evening. The friend's parents couldn't fit a meeting into their schedule, so the festivities went on without Jason.

"Jason doesn't leave the house unless I know exactly where he's going," says Mr. Boggs. "We don't argue about it. I just tell him the way it is."

Jason, who towers over his father, nods in agreement.

Coy McMenemy, a longtime family friend, believes that Mr. Boggs is a positive influence on Jason. It may be awhile, he says, before the young man appreciates his father's commitment and concerns.

"Being a custodial parent confines Eddie," Mr. McMenemy says.

ganization," says Gerry Issacs, a vice president. "I think it helps him cope when his son leaves town."

When Jason isn't in school, he goes to work with his father, who is a brick mason. When they're not mending cracks or mixing mortar, they attend meetings. Together.

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"Sometimes I want to date and do other things men do. Now I spend my free time at their school, or I go to Scout meetings. I don't hang around anyone my own age."

— Amado Reyna

mother can give. When a child hurts herself, fathers say, 'You'll be OK,' Ms. Maxwell says. "Women cuddle children. When Najja is with me, she wants me to do things for her that she's old enough to do for herself. She wants to be bathed and lotioned, for example. She does these things for herself when she's with her dad. I think she *needs* to be babied. There are just some things a man can't provide a child."

Karen Keaton, owner of the Richardson day-care center where Najja attended preschool, agrees — to an extent. She says that Najja's development has made her more open-minded about single fathers

when Mr. Boggs, 40, needs some parenting advice, he calls his buddies. If he needs more, he calls Parents Without Partners, an international single parents' group.

"There are many times when I don't know what to do, when I don't have the answers," he says quietly. "When two people share the same space, there's going to be friction."

Mr. Boggs, who has two adult daughters, became involved with the group when his second marriage ended in divorce. He called on the organization so much that members elected him president of the Dallas chapter.

"He's really given a lot to this or-

When they aren't in meetings, father and son visit dance clubs where Mr. Boggs boogies to '60s music and Jason shoots pool, plays pingpong or sips sodas. Mr. Boggs works at a desk in his home office. Jason passes time in the next room strumming a bright red guitar or building model cars.

"Eddie doesn't pamper and spoil him the way I would," Mr. McMenemy says. "But if I had to do it over again, that's how I'd have raised my kids. I have a daughter and son. I love them like a pet, but the more you pamper them, the more problems you have."

# Demands of raising kids alone



The Dallas Morning News: Catharine Krueger

daughter Christina during her court meeting.

The Boggses descend on neighborhood grocery stores two to three times a week. A trek to the local Tom Thumb seems to cheer Jason. He fills the basket with frozen pizza, frozen chicken nuggets, frozen dinners, frozen yogurt, frozen Tater Tots, Spam, soda, assorted chips and a big container of fresh melon chunks.

"We're together constantly when he's not in school," Mr. Boggs says. Jason says he sometimes feels confined by the companionship. He is both apprehensive and excited about an upcoming visit with his mother, a factory worker who lives near Peoria, Ill.

"My mom lets me do whatever I want," he says.

Mr. Boggs and his first wife, Wanda Rogers, divorced when their youngest child and only son was a toddler. By the time Jason turned 3, she had remarried. As Jason grew older, disagreements with his step-

here, I don't get to see my dad."

Five years ago, Theda Owens marshaled her family's meager resources for a bitter battle over custody of her grandchildren, Christina and Steven Reyna.

The Owenses lost to the children's father, Amado Reyna.

"I had my doubts about him," Mrs. Owens says of her ex-son-in-law. "I thought he was going to dump those babies on his mother. Most men either find another woman, or they dump the kids on their mothers."

Angered by the judge's decision, Mrs. Owens, 71, couldn't imagine celebrating any holiday — let alone Father's Day — with the construction contractor. Now one of his staunchest supporters, she plans to treat Mr. Reyna and the 7-year-old twins to a Father's Day dinner.

"He keeps them clean, keeps them in school and keeps them fed," Mrs. Owens says. "He helps them with their lessons and does all the cooking and cleaning. He's doing a wonderful job. I've never seen another man do it."

Mr. Reyna says he does what he has to. The twins' mother, Denene Owens Reyna, can't contribute. She's serving a 15-year sentence in the women's state prison in Gatesville.

Mr. Reyna, 42, pulls off a cap to reveal a scar on his scalp. The healed wound is one of six he received during two years in Vietnam. A disabled veteran, he received a Bronze Star for his heroism. But he says the war experiences, as tough as they were, just don't compare to the trials of parenthood.

"I thought I went through hell over there until I got the twins," Mr. Reyna says. "When they were real little (and) still in diapers, I used to cry. I'm talking tears."

He recounts the past five years during the family's weekly trip to Wyatt's Cafeteria. Steven gobbles his peach pie, shucks one shoe and runs around the restaurant. Christina, dressed in a sleeveless pink dress, shivers and burrows under her father's arm.

Mr. Reyna, who has two adult children from another marriage,

## For more information

To learn more about single fathers, contact:

■ Parents Without Partners at 556-0963.

■ *Full-Time Dads*, a bi-monthly magazine, P.O. Box 120773, St. Paul, Minn., 55112-0773.

Spanish," he says. "I think it's important."

If Mr. Reyna errs, Mrs. Owens says, it's that he's overly protective.

"He acts like they're 3 or 4," she says. "They have to be in his sight at all times. He'll let them stay with my granddaughter every now and then, but it used to be he wouldn't do that."

Mr. Reyna admits that he is cautious.

"I do tell them to stay close to Daddy," he says. "There are a lot of crazy people out there."

Because of these fears, he adjusts his lifestyle to accommodate the twins.

"Sometimes I want to date and do other things men do," Mr. Reyna says. "Now I spend my free time at their school, or I go to Scout meetings. I don't hang around anyone my own age."

When Mr. Reyna received custody of the twins, he worked nights as a postal clerk. Since he couldn't get a schedule change or find a baby sitter willing to spend nights with twins in diapers, he quit.

After he depleted a small savings account and discovered that his disability checks wouldn't provide for the family, he became an independent contractor. The job frees him to work around the children's schedule.

Gloria Cotter, a rental manager with the realty company Justiss and Justiss, frequently hires Mr. Reyna.

"He calls in from jobs and says, 'I'm leaving now. I got to pick the kids up from school,'" Ms. Cotter says. "He says, 'Sorry, I'm running late. I had to sew up some socks.' He puts the kids first."

They also look after him. Steven, who can't find the server, is determined to give his father some water.

"Here, drink mine," says Steven, spilling a little as he slides the full

1- father intensified. At 12, the boy  
3, came to Texas to live with his fa-  
1- ther.

1- The move has been good for  
S Jason, Mr. McMenemy says. "Ed-  
S die's been a good influence. Jason  
3; used to be a real quiet little person.  
1, The boy felt the world was against  
r him. Since he's been here, he's  
opened up to people around him."

1 Jason, eager to be 18 and inde-  
pendent, says he likes his father's  
company and will miss him, despite  
e their differences.

r "We have fun," Jason says. "We  
t go bowling together. We play bas-  
e ketball. We talk about women. We  
talk about racing. When I'm not

describes parenthood as one long  
learn-as-you-go lesson. The educa-  
tion, he says, has been more chal-  
lenging than the courses he took to  
become a plumber, electrician and  
painter. During his first week of  
full-time fatherhood, he says, he fig-  
ured he'd change diapers once or  
twice a day. The twins set him  
straight.

"They'd take off their diapers  
and sling them across the floor,"  
says Mr. Reyna, "or they'd walk up  
to me and pat their bottoms."

Today, he talks proudly about  
what he's taught the twins.

"Their mother is white, so I  
made a point of teaching them

glass toward Mr. Reyna.

Christina kisses her father on  
~~the cheek, then scrunches her nose.~~

"Daddy, you've got to shave," she  
says.

Flattered by the affection, he  
puts an arm around each of the chil-  
dren.

"When the babies came, the  
nurses brought them to me," Mr.  
Reyna says. "I had one in each arm,  
and it was the happiest day of my  
life. They still make me happy.

"Steven and Christina have  
made me have more patience. I  
went to Vietnam and came back  
keyed up. Having kids has unkeyed  
me. I have no regrets."