

# Divorced dads burned up over lack of equal rights

By JACKIE KLEIN

Jane Monroe is divorced and has a live-in boyfriend. She abuses her small son, but the court refuses to hear her former husband's complaints and repeated requests for custody of the child.

Dr. Joe Hunter was successful until his divorce. He petitioned the court to reduce child support payments but was refused. His ex-wife, he says, has turned the children against their father and he is denied visitation rights.

Laura Jackson is remarried. She insists her children call her second husband "Daddy" and their real father "Jack." Jack says he feels like a surrogate parent.

The names aren't real but the incidents are. These are among the problems which spawned a group of divorced men called Fathers For Equal Rights of Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties (ERF) who protest what they consider unfair treatment by the courts. They joined to battle "sex-biased" laws on child custody favoring the mother.

ERF, which meets the third Thursday of each month in Stevenson Elementary School in Southfield, is a non-profit organization of about 1,000 divorced fathers devoted to gaining equal rights to their children.

THE GROUP has received a barrage of criticism from divorced mothers who claim fathers aren't always concerned about what is best for their children and don't deserve equal or joint custody.

"We're aware of divorced fathers fighting responsibilities," said Dave Kruger, vice president of the group. "But we want to be more responsible for our children than merely writing a support check to the Friend of the Court."

"The system doesn't care about the needs of the kids. Judges don't listen, and custody is a social issue handled legally by attorneys who have no con-

cept of human psychology. When we talk about equal rights, we're implying equal rights for mothers as well as fathers."

One of the goals of ERF is to eliminate the use of the courts' contempt powers to jail a man for being behind in support payments.

"We know many divorced mothers claim their ex-husbands are in arrears in child support payments but don't go to jail," Kruger said. "But divorced dads do go to jail for non-support. Maybe they can't afford to contribute because they've been affected by the downturn in the economy. But the meter keeps running on child support payments."

"FAILURE TO pay is considered contempt of court. How can a man who is out of work afford to hire an attorney? And if he's in jail, how can he find a job? The point is if the father isn't fit, he shouldn't get custody but neither should an unfit mother."

Alan Lebow, ERF president, claims many divorced fathers have been neutered by the system. Members yesterday burned their athletic supporters and underwear in front of the Oakland County Courthouse in Pontiac.

"The action was a public protest to draw attention to the continuing emasculation of men fighting for parental privilege denied them by judges," Lebow said. "In 90 percent of divorce cases, judges grant the mother full custody of children."

"Women burn bras, students burn flags, and we have chosen these particular garments to symbolize our frustration and feelings of impotency. We've been denied our rights to remain parents to our children. We are mad as hell and we aren't going to take it anymore. It looks like we're headed for the Supreme Court."

ABOUT 40 percent of the cases in Oakland County Circuit Court are divorce disputes, according to William Russow, co-vice president of ERF.

"Judges hear cases of rape, murder and non-custodial fathers who are excommunicated from their kids' lives," Russow said.

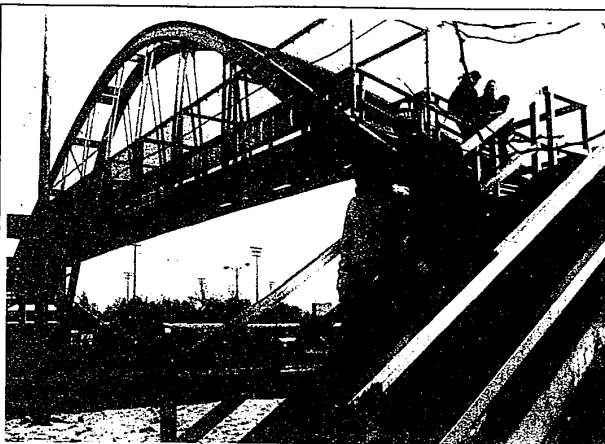
"Mothers who don't let their former husbands see the children don't go to jail," he said in an interview Monday. "There's no mandate to enforce visitation rights for fathers. And what about the emotional trauma?"

Divorced fathers have been denied access to their children's school records, Russow maintained. According to public law, he said, schools lack the authority to withhold records from non-custodial parents.

With the advent of women's liberation, mothers are contributing more and more to the family income and fathers aren't the sole breadwinners, Kruger said.

Women are becoming increasingly aware of their individuality and often find marriage constricting," he contended. "Some divorced mothers don't want custody of their children. We're not anti-wife or anti-mother. We're just asking for joint custody."

"We're fighting for the courts to give us a chance to be equal parents. Every child should have two competent parents to make decisions. We want to be more than check-writers. We want a share in our kid's lives and we want what's best for them. You can't legislate responsibility."



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