

# Moms fight trauma of not having their children

By Marie McGee  
Staff writer

Bonnie Copeland and Gail Nigh are part of an ever-increasing number of women suffering from pain that is usually reserved for the fathers of divorce watching their children grow up from afar.

They know first-hand what it's like to experience the emotional seasaw of guilt and frustration, playing the role of the secondary parent after years of being an anchor in the lives of their children. They know how it feels to be the "outsider."

Both women are non-custodial parents — "weekend moms" — who have given up their children to their husbands to raise following divorce.

In Copeland's case, it was her decision. In Nigh's case, it was the judge who made the decision, not on the basis that she was an unfit parent, but rather on the fact that the living arrangement at the time appeared to be stable and convenient.

COPELAND OF Redford Township was awarded the children at the time of her divorce. Her decision to turn over her two young sons to her husband's care stemmed from a combination of events spanning a year.

One was a serious health problem involving recurring bouts of pneumonia and bronchitis that required hospitalization and kept her from working. Another was an unreliable car that broke down frequently, sometimes causing her to miss work and adding to her financial difficulties.

A third was a mixup with the Friend of the Court over child support payments sent by her husband. Failure to receive the money on time threw her even further into debt.

The upshot was that she found she was unable to cope both physically and financially with raising her two sons. "We were practically starving," she



Gail Nigh (left) and Bonnie Copeland are mothers who don't have custody of their children. The support group, Mothers Without Custody, helps them cope with their problems.

recalled. "I couldn't get any help. My ex-husband wouldn't help me. I didn't have any family nearby."

There were other factors, but it was mainly the financial problems that led her to relinquish custody.

"I VOWED I would never give them up," she said, but after a year of hardship and struggling, she said she got to the point "where I couldn't be selfish and think only of my interests. I had to think of their welfare."

Nigh's case was different. At the time of the divorce, the judge granted custody of her two daughters to their father because they were in his custody at the time of the divorce.

This occurred, she said, when he came and took them from the family home the week after they separated and he moved out of the house.

HE CAME BY one afternoon while she was away and the children's grandmother was the baby-sitter, Nigh said. "He picked them up and never returned with them," she said. He ignored her requests to return the girls to the home, Nigh said.

Nigh said she was shocked at the divorce proceedings when the judge awarded custody of the girls to her husband "just because they were already in his care."

"So let's leave it that way," she quoted the judge as saying.

**'Don't call us 'weekend moms.' We are full-time mothers. We still worry about them all the time. We still go to school functions and try to do all the things we did before. . .'**

Another shock came when the judge ordered her to pay \$40 in child support monthly when her income was practically nil. She is fighting that ruling just as she is still fighting to gain custody of the two girls.

It was one of several bitter and costly legal lessons she and Copeland have learned as non-custodial parents.

"DON'T CALL US 'weekend moms,'" said Nigh. "We are full-time mothers. We still worry about them all the time. We still go to school functions and try to do all the things we did before during the times they are with us."

The two women went through their ordeals separately. They met when Copeland called Mothers Without Custody, a nationwide support group, and was given Nigh's name as someone she could talk with. After meeting, the two women decided to set up an area chapter of Mothers Without Custody.

The nationwide group was first organized by a Boston radio talk-show host who asked her ex-husband to take their two children after she had serious medical problems. The problems and frustrations she encountered prompted her to form the support group whereby women could have a place to talk out the traumas of being part-time mothers with others.

THE GROUP NOW is estimated to have 700 members in 110 cities from all backgrounds and with a variety of complex reasons for not living with their children most of the time.

"My mother sent me a clipping about

ded," added Nigh. For instance, something she learned only recently might have an impact on the outcome of the custodial question. Had she known about it at the time her husband took the daughters, she could have obtained a court order that would have forced her husband to return the children to the marital home. The judge might not have turned the children over to their father, she feels.

The next meeting of the fledgling group is Tuesday, March 20. A psychologist is scheduled to be guest speaker.

Focus of the talk will be on how children are often the pawns in the custodial struggle and how non-custodial mothers can make it easier on them and learn how to cope with it themselves. At the present time, they are meeting at individual homes. Women who are interested in attending are asked to call 532-5218 or 283-5229.

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