

Stepparent's plight

Lawyer assists as TV movie tackles issue

By Tom Panzenhagen
staff writer

Suppose there's a divorce in which stepchildren are involved. The husband is the children's biological father and the wife is their stepmother.

Further suppose that the stepmother looked after the children for several years, helped raise them and loved them as she would her own.

In such divorce cases, according to Birmingham attorney Richard Victor, "the wife may have legal rights to the house, but she has no legal rights to the children."

"There are no laws in 36 states providing for visitation rights of a step-parent and that, I think, is an injustice."

The scenario is a common one, Victor said. And it's soon to become a well-known scenario, since Aaron Spelling Productions and ABC-Warner Bros. Studios are making a TV movie-of-the-week called "Out of Step" about the plight of one such divorced stepmother.

Victor is serving as the movie's technical consultant. He's taken part in script revisions, and he's angling for a part in the movie, too.

"I'd like to play the lawyer, especially since they may get Linda Evans to play the stepmother."

But even if he doesn't get a chance to act opposite Evans (the glamorous star of another Aaron Spelling production, "Dynasty"), Victor said he's happy to have the opportunity to work on a Hollywood movie.

"It's not something that happens to a Michigan lawyer everyday."

It's not something that happens just by chance, either.

VICTOR IS legal adviser to the Oakland County chapter of Stepfamilies of

America, a six-year-old support group designed to help members of stepfamilies deal with their problems.

His wife, Denise, is the chapter's president-elect and the stepmother of Victor's son, Danny. The Victors, who live in Bloomfield Hills, have two other children, Ronnie and Sandra.

"There are 35 million stepparents in this country, and 1,800 stepfamilies are formed daily. By 1990, there will be more stepfamily households than traditional-family households."

"With numbers like that, I realized there was a void in the law."

"The American family has not gone under, but it has changed a bit. And this (the Stepfamily Association) is one of the ways we're coping with it."

It was a speech of Victor's that led to his involvement with the TV movie.

IN JANUARY, Victor spoke before a national conference of the Stepfamily Association in New Orleans and called for creation of a day to honor stepparents.

Two weeks later, Michigan Gov. James Blanchard signed a proclamation designating the first Sunday in October as Stepparent's Day. This year, it falls on Oct. 6.

California, Nebraska and Florida also will commemorate Stepparent's Day in October, and U.S. Rep. Dennis Hertel, D-Detroit, has introduced legislation calling for a national day of recognition.

"There are a significant number of people out there who should be recognized because they help raise other people's children."

"People often go through an emotional conflict of interest on Father's Day and Mother's Day because they wonder who they should celebrate with, who they should give cards and presents to."

They sometimes feel that they're cheating their biological parents if they celebrate with a stepparent."

When a representative of Aaron Spelling called the national office of the Stepparents Association for assistance with the movie project, they sent him to Victor.

"WE TALKED over the phone, and I agreed to be the technical consultant," Victor said. "They sent me the script, and I made a few changes from a technical point of view."

"But it's a brilliant script, and it's done in a way that's going to make people think. A splash of cold water is going to come to people who see it."

"When I saw it (the script), I realized very quickly that one movie can bring this message to more people than I could by speaking once a month for the rest of my life."

"It dramatizes what I've been trying to say perfectly. And they're a quality production company; they stand behind their work."

The producers will give the Stepfamily Association a few minutes of air time at the end of the movie to explain their organization and how to get more information about it, Victor said.

THE OAKLAND County chapter

meets monthly. Its next meeting is scheduled for 7:30 p.m. Monday, Sept. 23, at Derby School in southeast Troy. Annual membership in the non-profit organization is \$45, but anyone may attend the meetings for free. Call 855-0455 for more information.

The meetings are designed for whole families to attend, Victor said, "because parents such as myself have as much to learn as stepparents."

"There are enough problems involved when two adults marry; there are a lot more pressures when stepchildren are involved."

Victor also is pushing for legislation to assure the visitation rights of stepparents. But he doesn't like the term "visitation," he said.

"If your parents are in jail, you visit them on visiting day. I like 'joint parenting time.' Let's let children know they have three parents, or sometimes four parents."

"People say, 'Isn't that confusing?' Well, if you have three or four adults who want to help nurture a child, I see nothing wrong with that."

"To deny a child of that shared experience and those memories is to deprive him forever — those memories are lost forever. And that's an injustice, too."

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Totalling more than 2,500 miles, the Oakland County road system includes all public roads in townships and through streets in most cities and villages. It is the longest county system in Michigan.

Its subdivision streets alone (all in townships) make up more than 1,000 miles or the equivalent of a trip from Pontiac to Florida.

About half of the system is paved. More than half is within the county's urban area, where some roads are four and five lanes wide to handle heavy traffic. A single intersection, in Southfield, is the meeting place for 100,000 vehicles daily.



Birmingham lawyer Richard Victor is serving as technical consultant to the TV movie, "Out of Step."

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