

Story of a Single Dad

By Ken Marten

Slim to none – that's the chance most divorcing dads have had in getting custody of their kids. But 14 years ago, Todd Palmer defied the odds. Now, this local dad shares his story in what could be a growing trend.



“I can't think of anyone who's raised by just their dad, but it's just as good as having a mom or both parents,” says 16-year-old Tyler Palmer with his dad Todd. Photo by David Reed.

There aren't too many fathers like Todd Palmer. Although he's divorced, he has physical custody of 16-year-old son Tyler.

The Palmers live in a modest Rochester Hills home with Todd's girlfriend, Lisa Crawford, and three cats. Todd, 38, owns an employment agency and a human resources management company, Diversified Industrial Staffing and Diversified People LLC, both in Troy. Tyler is a sophomore at Avondale High School, where he plays football and wrestles.

“Being a good parent is a conscious choice, and a man can choose to be a participating, caring and loving parent,” Todd said. “The easy thing for me would have been to walk away, write a check and be a weekend dad. So often, it's assumed that only women have the ‘maternal instinct.’ We, as men, are not incapable of having it.”

Absent mother

Todd met his ex-wife while he was a student at Eastern Michigan University. They got married after a year-long courtship and settled in Livonia. Tyler was a honeymoon baby.

“It wasn't working out,” Todd said. “Neither one of us was really happy.”

At first, the divorce proceedings in the Wayne County Circuit Court, Family Division, were routine. Tyler was 2, and the couple pursued a joint custody arrangement.

“Then she changed,” Todd said. “It got really nasty and really ugly. A lot of accusations were made by his mother. It got to the point where we met with psychologists. Their recommendation was that the father should have custody, and that's what the judge decided. Through a series of missteps, she ended up with supervised visitation, and she chose not to participate.” ▶

Single Dad

Todd was just 24 when he was awarded custody, but the proceedings cost him dearly – much more than merely canceling cable television. He and Tyler moved around a lot, seeking the most affordable housing. For a while, they didn't even have phone service. Todd ran out of money and eventually couldn't afford to retain his attorney. He represented himself when his ex-wife appealed the custody decision, which Todd won.

"I literally went bankrupt and had to start my life over again," Todd said. "They sucked all my money out of me."

Today, it's been four years since Tyler last saw his mother. She doesn't return phone calls or answer her mail, said father and son.

"What's frustrating is that her parents, my grandparents, pretend nothing is wrong," Tyler said. "They send cards and tell me how much my mom loves me. But from my mom, nothing. It's probably not the best way to put it, but it pisses me off."

Todd said his ex-wife now has another

child, and her visits with Tyler ended roughly when her second child was born.

The numbers

How rare is the Palmer's family situation?

"When I got custody in Wayne County, the statistic there was that only 1 percent of men got custody," Todd said. "My lawyer said, 'I can't believe you got custody!'"

The statistics are a bit different today, perhaps an increase to 10 percent, according to family law attorney Brent Bowyer. A partner in Bowyer & Midtgard, P.C., and co-owner of the American Divorce Association for Men (ADAM), Bowyer and his team of lawyers only represent men in divorce and custody cases. ADAM and the firm are headquartered in the same Southfield office.

"Ten or 15 years ago, women – especially moms – were getting everything they wanted and men weren't getting

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any custody," Bowyer said. "In the four counties I practice in (Macomb, Oakland, Wayne and Washtenaw), I've really seen a change in the judges' mind-set. The judges are clearly pretty open now, not to say that my firm is responsible for it. They're seeing that kids need both parents in their lives, even if they're living separately."

Statistics kept by the Michigan Department of Community Health reveal that in 2005 (the latest available figures), the state saw 34,580 divorces that involved 31,481 children. (By contrast, there were

61,108 marriages in 2005.)

"Our clientele is above the normal percentage of men who are awarded custody," Bowyer said. "A man needs to have historically been the primary caregiver, unless there's issues with mom, like she's in jail or has a documented drug problem. The courts look at who's taking the kids to school, who's signing the daycare slips, that sort of thing. A man can't just show up and all of the sudden be Superdad."

Jim Simerad, who sits on the board of directors for DADS and MOMS of Michigan, a non-profit group that advocates for "equal rights for all parties affected by divorce, the break-up of the family, or children born to unmarried parents," says the court system is still severely fractured. Pointing to the same statistics, he noted that 63 percent of all custody awards are to the mother, 26 percent are joint custody agreements between both parents, and the remaining 11 percent to fathers, grandparents and

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His thinks the system has institutionalized single parenthood.

"Joint custody includes every other weekend," said Simerad, a global IT consultant whose daughter and ex-wife have moved to Louisiana. "You could have joint custody and see your kids only four days a month. People think that the 26 percent joint custody means that both parents are active in their kids' lives, but I have joint legal custody and haven't seen my daughter in seven years."

That's not for his lack of trying, Simerad added.

DADS and MOMS board member Larry Herren agrees that the system needs to change. Divorce doesn't have to be detrimental to children's lives as long as both parents remain active as parents. A father of one son with visitation (DADS and MOMS prefer the term "parenting time") and a clinical social worker, Herren has seen the aftermath of messy divorces with absentee moms and dads.

"Why is it that when you get divorced, you have to fight like hell to be a parent?" Herren asked. "The truth of the matter is that we have a broken system. It's important to have both genders involved in the lives of the children."

Stigmas

There's no question that being a single parent – whether the ex-spouse is active or voluntarily absent as in the Palmers' case – is trying. Finding the free time to meet new people is often difficult, and Todd recalls many uncomfortable first-date dinner conversations about being a single dad.

"My date's reaction would often be, 'How could you take your ex-wife's child away? I just think a child should be raised by the mother,'" Todd said.

When looking for work, Todd sought out family-friendly employers who offered flexible hours to accommodate school and daycare schedules and other activities important to any child's social

development. He started his own business largely to spend more time with Tyler, and hasn't forgotten the past.

"When I interview people at work, if they need time off because of their kids, I tell them 'no problem,'" Todd said. "For me, it's always very important that I participate in my child's life come hell or high water."

At Tyler's school, Todd made sure to introduce himself to teachers and principals and volunteered whenever possible when parents were needed.

"I wanted to ensure that he was held to the same standards as kids with two-parent families," Todd said. "I would not allow the fact that his mother was not participating in his life to be a crutch or that others would have lesser expectations for him."

The school environment is where Bowyer said some of his clients – dads – have encountered difficulties. He remembers one of his clients whose ex-wife had mental problems. She'd show up

Getting involved

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at school and lie to the staff who in turn refused to release the child to the father, who had physical custody, when he arrived for after-school pickup.

"In general, it's better now than it was 10 years ago, but the age group is still around that assumes that mom stays home and takes care of the kids while dad works," Bowyer said.

But if Tyler's observations are any indication, social assumptions are slowly shifting along with societal changes. Divorce and stepfamilies are being viewed less and less as abnormalities.

"I can only think of two or three friends that have two-parent homes," Tyler said. "I can't think of anyone who's raised by just their dad, but it's just as good as having a mom or both parents. Fathers are just as capable as mothers or both parents at raising children. I think I'm a pretty well-rounded person." ■

— Ken Marten is a freelance writer from metro Detroit.

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