

FEATURE

Men who hope to be fathers deserve recognition



It was Father's Day eight years ago and it was a difficult time for my husband, Joe, and me. Six months earlier we had gone through a miscarriage together.

At the end of Mass that Sunday, our pastor, Father Sileo, said, "I'd like to invite all fathers and all fathers-to-be to stand for a special blessing." At first my heart sank and then Father Sileo thoughtfully added, "And I'd also like to invite any man who would like to be a father some day to stand as well."

Joe stood tall and proud and, as the blessing began, he turned around and reached for my hand. Although we had grieved together over our loss, until that moment I don't think I realized how much Joe wanted to be a father. I let go of his hand and rushed to the back of the church, thankful that my tissues and sunglasses were still in my jacket pocket.

I had prepared myself for the feelings I might have on Mother's Day, at baby showers and upon the birth of a friend's or a relative's child. I just hadn't prepared myself for the gentle smile on my husband's face as he received this Father's Day blessing. And I began to think that there are many men who want nothing more than to be a good father. Too often, perhaps, we overlook that in growing numbers, men too are struggling with the loss of a child, the inability to conceive a child and the demands of balancing careers and children.

The news stories of fatherless children living in poverty and "Deadbeat Dads" who refuse to pay for basic support of their children, grab today's headlines and can sometimes give fatherhood a bad rap. These stories should remain on the front page because there is nothing more reprehensible than a parent who denies responsibility or withholds support and love from his or her own child.

But there are many fathers who aren't making news but who are making sacrifices so that they will be able to spend more time with their children. Many fathers have turned down jobs because they would have taken too much time away from their families. It's not uncommon for a father to take a personal day from work to volunteer as a



BY EILEEN MARX

family matters

chaperon on a class trip. More fathers are asking for paternity leave. Increasingly, fathers are taking an active role and enriching the lives of their children.

My husband's best friend, a writer and teacher, stayed home full-time with his daughter, Margaret, until she went to nursery school. I imagine many mothers who watched him were envious of the way he helped to raise a confident and intelligent little girl. One of my son's best friends, Daniel, has a dad who stays home with Daniel and his 6-month-old sister during the day and then works as a contractor three evenings a week. Both children are

thriving with all the love and attention from dad.

These are not the typical cases. But many fathers are realizing that volunteering at their children's schools once a month, coaching their children's soccer team or spending weekend afternoons at the park can be a real boost to family life, especially when children need time with their parents more than any other activity in their day.

We pay a lot of lip service to putting children and families first. We need to support and encourage men and women who are quietly living out this commitment through their actions. There are also many men who don't know what it means to be a good father. Perhaps there was no example in their own home. I think we have an obligation to reach out to fathers in crisis through programs of education and outreach before children suffer abuse or neglect.

There are also children without fathers to whom we can reach out so they will know love and compassion in their lives. When I first met Joe, we were both stu-

dents at Boston College. Once a week he volunteered his time to help a fatherless 8-year-old boy, Chris, through the big Brother Association of Boston. During the past 17 years, Chris and his mom have become very special in our lives. When we left Boston, Joe kept in touch with Chris through phone calls and letters. We always enjoy hearing about his latest girlfriends, his itching to get a place of his own, his jobs and his dreams for the future. I believe with all my heart that because Chris has been surrounded by people who care, one day he will be a wonderful father, just like his Big Brother Joe.

I feel my own children are blessed to have a father like Joe. He's always there for the big events in their little lives. But he also made dates to have lunch with his young daughter at nursery school and volunteered to drive on his son's class trip to the local pumpkin patch. Each day he delights in hearing every detail of the kids' day and can get just as silly as they can. In many ways, Joe is still a big kid himself. There are moments when I'm watching Joe playing with our two children when I wonder if he will ever make the final step into adulthood. I hope for the kids' sake and mine that he never does. It's what I love best about him.

I knew eight years ago that one day Joe would be a wonderful father. No, he's not perfect, but only with our heavenly Father does fatherhood reach perfection. On the day our son, Bobby, was born Joe wrote, "Robert Francis was born at 6:51 a.m. Wet, rainy night. A long, endless night of painful labor for Eileen — but in the morning, wondrous joy and glory, our 8-pound boy. I already know this is a special child. It's a paternal instinct, but I think he understands so much already — about us, about the world around him. When Bobby was delivered, I was shaking. I was unprepared for the emotion and the reality of the new life set before our eyes. Beautiful, beautiful boy."

In two weeks, I will wish Joe a Happy Father's Day once again. And Happy Father's Day, too, to all fathers, all fathers-to-be and all those men who hope some day to be a father.

Marx lives in Laurenceville, N.J., with her husband and two children.



Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

Fatherhood computes

Charles Belfield (left), a 6-year-old student at St. Plus the Tenth School, demonstrates his computer prowess to his father, Mark, and brothers Martin and Andrew at the school's May 19 "open computer night."

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Sentimental scripts win followings

NEW YORK (CNS)

— The following are home videocassette reviews from the U.S. Catholic Conference Office for Film and Broadcasting. Each videocassette is available on VHS format. Theatrical movies on video have a USCC classification and Motion Picture Association of America rating. All reviews indicate the appropriate age group for the video audience.

The Bishop's Wife (1947)

A debonair, smartly tailored angel (Cary Grant) uses his heavenly powers to help the neglected wife (Loretta Young) of a busy Episcopal bishop (David Niven) renew her husband's ministry to those in need rather than in raising the money for a new cathedral. Director Henry Koster's sentimental Christmas fable has the virtue of a good script, sincere performances and some amusing moments. Most of the family will find it charming. The USCC classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. Not rated by the MPAA.

The Preacher's Wife (1996)

Charming remake of the 1948 fantasy, "The Bishop's Wife," in which an angel (Denzel Washington) is sent to help the discouraged Baptist minister (Courtney B. Vance) of a struggling inner-city church and his neglected wife (Whitney Houston) rediscover romance in their marriage. Di-



rector Penny Marshall's slow-paced, sentimental story about the values of faith and hope is enlivened by an engaging cast and vibrant gospel songs. The USCC classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. The MPAA rating is PG — parental guidance suggested.

Larger Than Life

Underperforming comedy in which a hapless chap (Bill Murray) inherits his father's performing elephant, then struggles to escort the unruly pachyderm across the country to an impatient buyer. Directed by Howard Franklin, the comic proceedings are pleasant enough, but never venture far beyond a limited odd-couple premise. Fleeting profanity and brief menace. The USCC classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. The MPAA rating is PG — parental guidance suggested.

The Thief and the Cobbler

Thin animated tale of ancient Baghdad where a young cobbler (voice of Matthew Broderick) wins the hand of his beloved princess (voice of Jennifer Beals) after saving the city from an evil sorcerer (voice of Vincent Price). Directed by Richard Williams, the production is visually splendid, but the story is saccharin. The USCC classification is A-I — general patronage. The MPAA rating is G — general audiences.