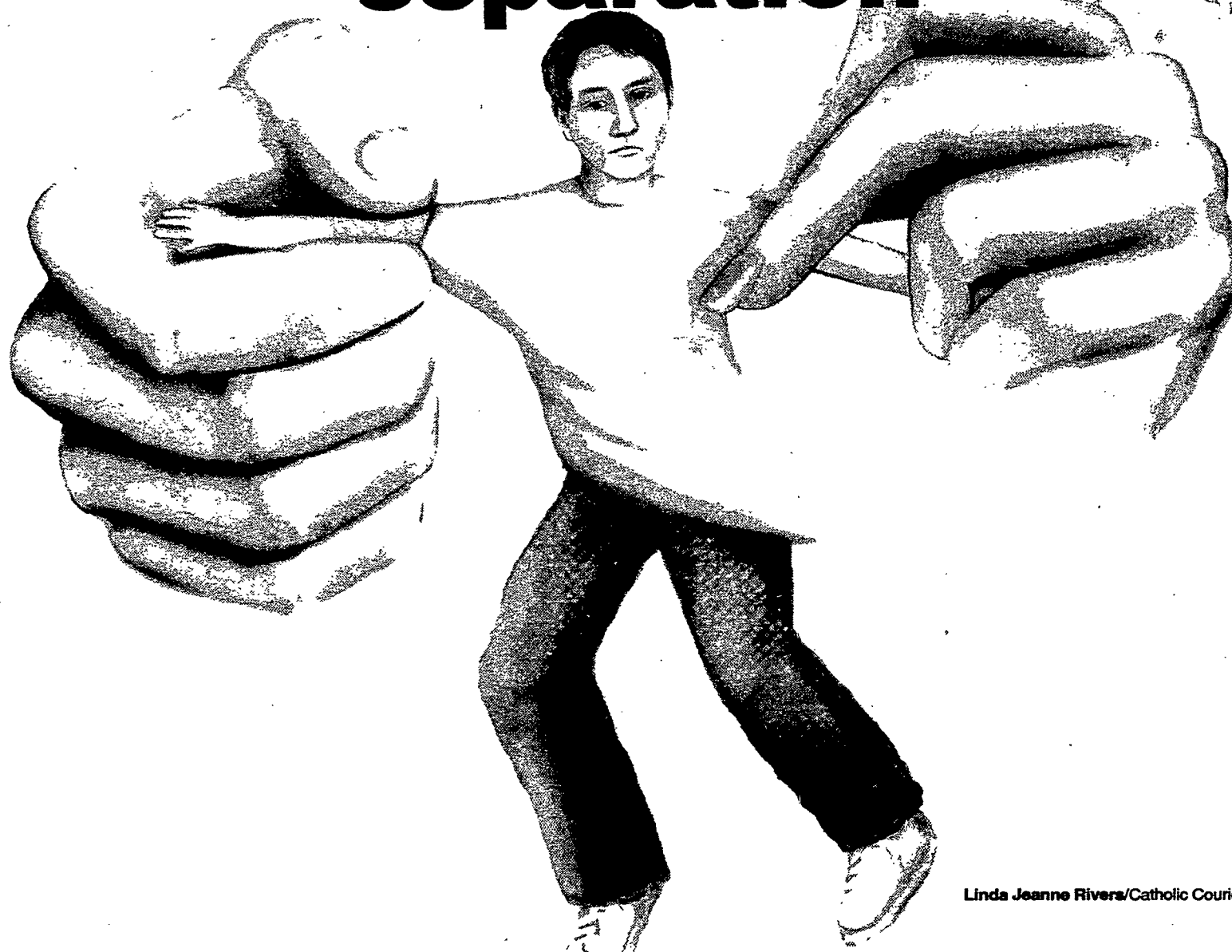


on the MOVE

Story by
Mike Latona

Surviving through a separation



Linda Jeanne Rivers/Catholic Courier

Steve Mahatcke and Elissa Uhl are children — as defined by age, but perhaps not by life experience.

Steve's parents separated approximately two years ago, and now Steve, 13, only spends limited time with his father. He said that life changed very quickly when his dad left home.

"It kind of scared me. I was wondering, 'Why?' I was only in fifth grade," said Steve, who lives with his mom, sister and brother.

"We had to clean a lot more. It was hard, definitely," he added. "When you're 14 or 15, that's when you think it's time to start growing up. But ever since I was 11, my childhood wasn't there as much."

Meanwhile, Elissa's parents, also, have been separated for about two years.

"It was weird; I didn't have a dad to live with. I felt angry," said Elissa, 13, who lives with her mother and one of her two sisters.

Nowadays, Elissa said, her mother works extra hours to make ends meet. "My sister and I clean the house and make dinner sometimes," she said. "I feel like an adult; I feel I had to mature a lot."

Steve and Elissa were among the participants at the HOPE 2000 Conference held May 20 at St. Charles Borromeo School in Greece. The day-long conference offered numerous workshops and seminars for families who have been affected by divorce, death or some other type of separation.

One workshop, aimed specifically at young people and attended by both Steve and Elissa, was led by Joe Kenney, justice-and-peace coordinator at Catholic Family Center in Rochester. Kenney told the participants that young people feel a need to belong; to be generous; to be independent; and be aware of their skills and talents. If those needs are not met in a healthy way, Kenney pointed out, youths might be prone to high-risk behavior — such as joining a gang to achieve a sense of belonging, or committing crimes to feel they've mastered a skill.

Kenney told the *Catholic Courier* that it's especially important to go over this subject matter with youths from broken homes. He said that in his 10 years of working with children with high-risk behavior, "A large

percentage of them come from single-parent households."

Although many single parents are capable of raising their children for success, Kenney said, "It's just harder. They're trying to put out so many fires." Consequently, he said, consistent behavioral patterns emerge among children in these families.

"Their attention-seeking may be more dramatic. Or, they may become more isolated," Kenney said. "They may experience multiple feelings; they may frequently express that they're confused, tired or angry. Their boundaries are all messed up; they don't know how they're supposed to behave."

During his workshop at the HOPE 2000 Conference, Kenney encouraged youths to identify their emotions, to talk at length about healthy ways to get their needs met, and to "identify that they're good in some things." Participants listed such skills as playing musical instruments; baking; making new friends; making friends feel better; playing sports; and sharing their possessions with both friends and strangers.

Steve has a positive outlook on his future, saying that he enjoys building models and would like to become a mechanic or construction worker. He also looks forward to getting married and having children, despite the strife in his own family.

"It's not getting in my way. There's nothing I can do, so I kind of accept it," remarked Steve, a seventh-grader at Rush-Henrietta's Burger Middle School and parishioner at Church of the Good Shepherd in Henrietta.

Meanwhile, Elissa said she hopes to become a doctor, get married and start a family. She added that she, also, prefers looking ahead instead of dwelling on her family's past problems.

"I hate talking about it. I don't like talking about bad things," said Elissa, a seventh-grader at Canandaigua Middle School. "I like talking about happy, upbeat things."

"I want to be hopeful."

COMING NEXT WEEK:
Faith and photography