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Single... With Children

My childhood probably wasn't much different than most women who grew up on the tail end of the baby boom generation. We spent our allowances on top 45 singles with little plastic inserts to play them on the stereo with the requisite penny taped to the needle to prevent it from skipping. We read Tiger Beat magazine and had secret (okay, not so secret) crushes on Tony DeFranco, Keith Partridge, and Donny Osmond. We watched the Brady Bunch every week in prime time, grew up without VCRs or microwave ovens, and we all played with Barbie. Barbie had countless wedding gowns, depending on whether or not you wanted her to be Winter Wedding Barbie, Fall Foliage Barbie, or Summer Splendor Barbie. We all dreamed of someday meeting our version of Ken, marrying, having a family, and living happily ever after.

My score is three out four. At 40-years-of-age and after 11 years of marriage I find myself divorced with two young children. Parenting itself is tough. Single-parenting is infinitely harder. What was once shared by two is now an individual job. With one income (and child support if fortunate) single parents are often forced to live in smaller homes or apartments. Luxuries become a thing of the past. Car pooling, homework, sports, music lessons, and more must all be balanced with career, keeping in mind the age old equation that your children come first. Combine that with the constant worry that you've failed your children in some way, that their ability to grow to adulthood and have a successful marriage themselves is comprised (thanks, Oprah), and you're on a roller coaster ride straight to Stressville, Guiltville, and all major pressure points in-between.

My two children couldn't be more different if they tried. My oldest daughter is convinced that a drastic mistake was made on the day of her birth and that she was supposed to be born into a rich, well-to-do family complete with chauffeur, maid, butler, controlling interest in the local shopping mall, and a prepaid debutante ball. Her glass is always half-empty. I fear that someday, despite how hard I try to get her to see the bright side of life, she's going to be the one to give her engagement ring back because its simply not big enough. Her younger sister is the complete opposite. She cries when she sees an ambulance because she knows someone has been hurt. With her there's a bright side to everything, nothing that compromise can't solve, and a lesson to be learned along the way. She does live with her older sister, however, and she eagerly hopes that one day we will indeed have that chauffeur, maid, and butler. Despite their differences they are bright, beautiful girls with a zest for life. Shopping is their hobby. Gossiping with friends is their life. Screaming is a must when either very excited or very frightened. Fashion, music, phones, shoes.... my house is a frantic mess of churning estrogen. We are a family. We are a team. And we are happy.

Still, I worry. Every parent has guilty feelings that they're not doing the best job for their children. Single parents worry more. Failing at marriage is one of the biggest blows your self-confidence can take. The personal feelings of self-doubt are overwhelming. Will I find love again? Am I too old to start again? Am I desirable? My friends were all married. Where would I even begin to start socializing again? And, all other things aside, could I fit another relationship into this hectic, busy lifestyle? Still, these worries all pale in comparison to how I worry about my children. Did failing in my marriage fail them? Or have I shown them that being strong, doing what needs to be done in a bad situation, is possible? Have I set a bad example or a good example? In my case, I have to say the latter. My marriage didn't fail because no one tried. After more than two years of marriage counseling it just wasn't working. I was depressed, unhappy, and doubting my self-worth. I've emerged on the other side of divorce a much stronger, wiser, happier person. When my ex and I told our children we were splitting up the whole family was in counseling. We were doing, and are still doing, everything possible to make sure our children know that our divorce was not caused by them. And still, I worry.

But I've learned some things on this unavoidable detour in my life. There are other people out there just like me. Good, hard working, single parents who's only fault is not being able to make their marriage work. Marriages fail for many reasons but the end product is quite often the same - single parent families struggling with new worries, new issues, and a new path in life. Not long after my ex moved out I went in search of a group called Parents Without Partners. I had heard of them before and thought surely, if anyone knew what I was going through, it would be them. Fortunately there was a chapter in the Raleigh area and I forced myself (no small feat for someone whose self-confidence is already at an all time low) to attend a membership orientation. Quite simply, it was one of the best decisions I've ever made.

Parents Without Partners, while not technically a support group, is an international, non-profit organization dedicated to single parent families. I found people - both men and women - just like me. Whether divorced, widowed, separated, or never married we are all individuals facing the unique challenges of single-parenting in today's world. Some of us have custody of our children, some see our children rarely, but we're all single parents and face the issues that go along with that every day of our lives. Every month each chapter of Parents Without Partners (PWP) publishes a calendar of monthly events in their Newsletter. We do everything from going out to dinner, going to the movies, holding discussions on a relevant single-parent topic, nature tours, museum outings, comedy clubs, and book group discussions - just to name a few. Some PWP events are parents only, some are for parents and their children.

Quite simply, I found a home. A place where my troubles were immediately understood. A place where everyone else had the same fears and worries about this turning point in life. A place where I was accepted, not judged. A place where I made great new friends, friends that I'll have for life. It has been almost two years since I've joined PWP and the changes in my life have been tremendous. For starters, I got my

self-confidence back. PWP gave me an outlet for my worries, a sounding board for my fears. I learned I wasn't alone. I learned that I could, and would, succeed. It also gave me an important social outlet. If I found myself without my children because of child visitation there was always something on the PWP calendar for me to do. I was no longer the third wheel on a social outing. I felt normal again.

Most importantly, PWP has given my children the opportunity to see that there are other successful single parent families out there just like us. They know that being part of a single parent family is okay, that it works, and that it's not their fault. They've made friends in a similar situation and take comfort in knowing they're not alone. They look forward to the monthly calendar of events almost more than I do and eagerly circle the things they want to do.

This past spring I was elected President of the Capital Area chapter of PWP, chapter #1349. I can't express enough what PWP and its members have meant to me during this difficult period in my life. Serving this organization is my way of giving back. I had to force myself to go to that first meeting. Now I help others plan the new monthly calendar and host quite a few events of my own. I love meeting new people and sharing new ideas. I strongly urge anyone facing the challenges of single parenting today to check out Parents Without Partners. You'll find a supportive group of people who understand what you're going through and activities for both you and your children. We're easy to find, simply go to www.parentswithoutpartners.org and look for a local chapter. I think you'll agree that PWP membership will make what can often be a difficult time into an exciting turning point in your life.