

WEDDINGS

# Fathers and Stepfathers Join Hands at Weddings

Field Notes

By ALIX STRAUSS JUNE 17, 2016

It's long been said that weddings bring out the best and the worst in people. In a society where divorce has become commonplace, and where the accompanying hurt has been longstanding, some couples and their complicated families are finding that a wedding can present the perfect opportunity to break the emotional logjam.

Jacqueline Sweet, 26, was married last month at Carmel Valley Ranch in Carmel, Calif., with no fewer than eight eager parents (her fiancé's parents were also divorced and remarried) cheering on the couple.

"I knew my father would be walking me down the aisle," Mrs. Sweet said. "I'm a daddy's girl and the oldest of three. He was paying for the wedding, and walking me was extremely important to him."

Not wanting to exclude her stepfather, Kevin Smith, who has helped raise her since she was 3, Mrs. Sweet decided to give him the pivotal role of officiant. Convinced, however, that he would be too overtaken with emotion, Mrs. Sweet said that he agreed to a smaller role, that of giving the ceremony's only reading.

As the two dads walked down the aisle, Mrs. Sweet's father, Robert Hirt, 55, recalled passing Mr. Smith, her stepdad. "When I saw Kevin, he had tears in his eyes, and I thought, 'How can I not love this man?'" he said. "My daughter has twice the love and twice the caring, and that means you've done your kid right."

And the reading that was chosen? It was from First Corinthians: "Love is very patient and kind, never jealous or envious, never boastful or proud, never haughty or selfish or rude."

Stephanie Warner, 32, has two stepdads in addition to her father. "Who's going to walk me down the aisle has been a huge question I've thought about my entire life," she said.

As a wedding march played at her September 2011 marriage at the Testarossa Winery in Los Gatos, Calif., Mrs. Warner's father got the show started by walking her down the aisle to the front pew. He then gave her to her mother and current stepfather, who were waiting on one side of the aisle, while the other man who had been part of the bride's upbringing, her former stepfather, stood to the other side.

At that, "The four of us linked arms like in 'The Wizard of Oz' and we walked the rest of the way," Mrs. Warner said. "Then they handed me off to my husband. When the priest asked, 'Who gives this woman?,' they all in unison said, 'We do.'"

Mrs. Warner was 2 when her biological parents divorced. By age 5, her mother remarried, but she divorced again a decade later. Mrs. Warner was 24 when her mother married for a third time.

Her own wedding proved to be the perfect place to acknowledge her three fathers. As the couple cut the cake, Mrs. Warner said: "I love you dad. I love you dad. I love you dad." When she did, "the entire room erupted in laughter," she recalled. "Everyone knows I have a very blended family."

Her mother, Lorie Arkley, 60, added: "Walking the way we did was right for us. It was an amazing moment and it made me realize how lucky I am to be part of these men, each who love her."

This healing trend received a big boost last September, when a series of photos

were posted on Facebook from the wedding of Brittany Peck showing her biological father grabbing her stepfather's hand as the procession began. The images quickly went viral and caught the attention of more than 60 million viewers.

"The visual of two men walking their child down the aisle is a powerful statement," said Nicholas H. Wolfinger, a professor of family and consumer studies and an adjunct professor of sociology at the University of Utah. "It's about coming to terms with your parents' divorce, which often has been hard on kids. It's also a very positive statement and is something people can relate to and aspire to."

Professor Wolfinger attributes the rise in these shared, multifather moments to the fact that "divorced biological dads are more involved in their child's lives than they used to be," he said. "In the '80s, most dads vanished. One-third had not seen their kids in five years. That's no longer the case, especially for the millennials."

Today's blended family is as complex as a cocktail made from a variety of ingredients, each supplying a different flavor and texture.

"Thirteen hundred new stepfamilies are being formed every day," said Michelle Crosby, a lawyer and mediator, quoting data from the Pew Research Center. Ms. Crosby, who founded Wevorce, a website that seeks to make divorces more amicable, added that four in 10 couples remarry, and that based on statistics gathered by SmartStepfamilies.com, 40 percent of children are living in blended families.

Speaking of Mrs. Peck's viral wedding photo, Ariana Niver, 27, who married last December at the Meritage Resort and Spa in Napa, Calif., said: "I was so touched by it. I shared it on my Facebook page. It's a blessing to have two father figures, and I remember being impressed with how mature and selfless the decision to share that moment with this woman's father was."

Mrs. Niver, whose parents divorced when she was 2, and whose mother remarried a year later, had both her father and stepfather walk her individually, each give a speech and each have his own father/daughter dance.

"Deciding who should go first and who should give me away was extremely stressful," she said. Mrs. Niver's stepfather was assigned the lead and was met at the

halfway mark by her father. “When my stepdad walked me, I felt calm and relaxed; he was the perfect person to start me off,” she said. “Transitioning to my dad, I remember feeling proud. That he was the right person to lead me to my husband.”

As families merge and morph, so do the relationships within them. Couples — both straight and gay — are now revamping or reinterpreting wedding traditions. How many male figures walk a child down the aisle or who does a thoughtful handoff is one of the most recent of these reconfigurations.

“My generation is very open to sharing this moment,” Mrs. Niver said. “We don’t care about following an exact tradition.”

Alicia Zani, 29, is very close with her stepmother, Melissa Zani, and stepfather. When Alicia was married last September in New Hampshire, her father and stepfather both walked her down the aisle.

“It was Alicia’s idea to ask her father if he minded that she also ask her stepfather,” Melissa Zani said, who added that the bride’s father was not only on board but said he’d be disappointed if his daughter had failed to give a major role in the ceremony to her stepfather.

Melissa Zani, a divorce lawyer, mentioned that not all families function as cohesively as they do. “This is a culmination of hard work paired with the goal to make your child happy,” she said. “There is no ‘step’ in our family. That’s this generation’s gift to be able to do that.”

James H. Bray, an associate professor and a psychologist at the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, said: “There’s a real cultural shift happening. The loyalty conflicts and competition biological fathers may have felt in the ‘90s toward other men raising their children has dissipated. Fathers understand another person is helping to raise their child, and a lot of fathers are learning to be O.K. with that. That loyalty shift is also happening to the children of stepfamilies as they learn it’s O.K. to love both men. They realize their stepfathers are making more contributions to their lives socially, psychologically and financially.”

While some families affected by divorce are openly embracing weddings as a

healing moment, others find themselves only tentatively moving in that direction.

For Mrs. Warner, her wedding was the first time her three dads had been in the same room together. “They put their differences aside for the day,” she said. “Having them all in one place doesn’t mean it’s a lifetime change for them. It’s still a tender spot for everyone.”

It’s about love and equality, she said.

“I own these relationships,” Mrs. Warner said. “It was important not to remove anyone from this day because they’ve all been a part of my life. Each man is deeply significant and deserves to be a part of my special day.”

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