

'Dad of the Year'

By **TERESA HEINZ**
Missourian staff writer

For Father's Day, 1985, my hometown church in Ohio held an essay contest in which the children of the congregation were invited to persuade the deacons why their fathers should be named "Father of the Year."

My writing came easily as I described how my father, Cliff Heinz, raised my older sister and myself as a single parent.

I described my parents' divorce in 1976, when my father received full custody after my mother was judged to be an unfit parent.

"It seems so natural for me to have only my father that I never think about it," I wrote.

But the truth was, I thought about it every time I introduced myself to others. Today the numbers of single male parents are increasing as more fathers demand and receive full custody, but the numbers were minuscule during the late 1970s and early '80s. I still remember the silence falling over the room whenever adults announced, "Teresa's parents are divorced. She lives with her father."

While these adults saw my absent mother as a drawback, I saw only my father's positive influence on my life. My father never raised me according to sex stereotypes. In grade school I received toy trucks during holidays while female classmates displayed their dolls to the

class. I spent hours playing sports and climbing trees. Because I never knew limitations, I learned to take risks, set and achieve goals and stand up for what I believe is right.

Unfortunately, my church didn't agree with me. My five-page essay was rejected in favor of a friend's half-page description of

her rather normal nuclear family. My father's life countered the stereotype that mothers are better, more nurturing parents, but it was painful to see that close

friends weren't ready to relinquish such negative images of men.

Today in "Showcase" the Missourian introduces you to a Columbia single parent, George Zobrist, who is raising his daughter Tori, 4. Zobrist received custody following his divorce more than two years ago. He later left his career in order to be with his daughter full time.

Yet, Zobrist has no regrets.

"Now that I've got Tori, I want to spend as much time with her as I can," Zobrist said.

As we describe Zobrist's unwavering devotion to Tori, today we honor all fathers like my own whose love is setting a positive example for their children.



Heinz

COPY DESK: THIS IS FINAL DRAFT. AS ALWAYS, THANKS. ML

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suggested head: When a man loves his daughter ... For the love of Tori
subhead: Following his divorce three years ago, George Zobrist won
full custody of his daughter Tori, now 4.

875-8583 AC; edited by XXX ; copyedited by XXX ;</byline:12.2>By
Teresa Heinz Missouriian staff writer

]After a full day at the construction site, it's finally 5 p.m.,
and George Zobrist is tired. Even though the carpenter would like
time to relax this evening, he knows that, in reality, his day has
just begun.

Zobrist is a single father. Every evening after work he picks up
his 4-year-old daughter, Tori, at a local day care center and journeys
home to an evening of making dinner, playing games and learning the
alphabet.

Those evenings are a privilege he paid for with a custody battle
which involved five court visits and \$30,000 in attorney's fees.

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Divorced three years ago, Zobrist, 36, found that obtaining full
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The fight continued when Zobrist moved to Missouri in early 1994
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Now Zobrist and Tori live in a small Columbia apartment, where
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Although their evening routine is simple, it reflects the
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They usually end the evening by playing with Tori's dolls and coloring
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Even though Zobrist spends most of his free time with his
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"I was 31 years old before I had Tori," Zobrist said. "And I
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According to Carol Utterback, Columbia's PWP president, the organization offers low-cost or free educational and social activities that include parents and their children. PWP programs range from joint parent-child outings at amusement parks to workshops addressing issues such as single parents who date.

Utterback, a single mother of two, can relate to the struggles that he encounters as a single parent. Following Utterback's own divorce three years ago, she reached out to friends and relatives for support as she sought to rebuild her life. Another single parent, Judy Armbruster, helped persuade Utterback, 38, to join PWP four years ago.

"The best thing that single parents can do is to get a support group that allows them to do things with their children," Utterback said. "But I see a lot of single fathers struggling, because a lot of men think that they should go it alone. Women ask for help easier than men."

Out of Columbia PWP's 300 members, 100 are men. About a third of them have full or partial custody of their children. The group's median age is 44, Utterback said.

Because more single fathers are seeking and winning full custody, more courts are realizing that fathers are the best parent in some divorce cases, Utterback said.

In the past, preference for mothers was evident in the Uniform Marriage and Divorce Act, approved by the National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws in 1970. The Act's language does not make a maternal preference, but the Commissioners' Notes to the Act states that mothers are the preferred custodial parents.

Now that attitude seems to be changing. A 1983 study of custody cases by Jeff Atkinson, past chair of the American Bar Association and a member of the child custody committee, found that by the end of 1983 only between six and fourteen states applied preference for mothers in some form.

"We still have some judges who have a bias towards mothers," Atkinson said. "Perhaps these judges were brought up in a traditional environment in which the family might have felt that mothers are more important.

"But the bias is less than it used to be."

Highlighting Atkinson's assertion is a committee's 1989 study of gender bias in the Massachusetts courts. Joan Entmacher, a committee member and now senior policy counsel for the Women's Legal Defense Fund, said that when fathers in that state's custody cases sued for their children, they received full or shared custody 70 percent of the time.

In Utterback's experience, she found that in suits in which mothers were awarded custody, fathers typically played the role of "every other weekend parents," who kept the kids during weekends or part of the week.

Such custodial settlements partly stem from stereotypes that single fathers are inadequate as parents or can't care for small children, Utterback said. However, now that more single fathers are raising their children, the stereotypes against fathers are especially apparent.

"All single parents face stereotypes that say single parents aren't good parents, but single fathers face stereotypes, like ones saying that men raising little girls won't be able to help their daughters through their teens or dress them up in dresses," Utterback said.

* Linda Doss is supervisor of the Hinkson Children's Center in Columbia; two of the 63 children currently attending Hinkson are being raised by single fathers. Doss said that, like all single parents, single fathers face the struggles of finding quality day care and making ends meet. Yet Doss agrees that single fathers encounter questions that are rarely brought against mothers.

"There is the stereotype that fathers are not as competent with raising small children, especially with things like manners, social skills, dressing and bathing," Doss said.

According to Utterback, those stereotypes are present in daily activities that most parents don't think twice about. "It's the little things you face," Utterback said. "I was in the mall recently and I met a male friend with a tiny girl who had to go to the bathroom. He couldn't go into the women's restroom, so he asked me to take her. Situations like that are frustrating to single parents."

To counter the stereotypes, PWP includes members like Zobrist, who show that single fathers can be fine parents. "George cooks, his home is clean, his girl is so clean and cute, and George is so gentle and soft-spoken," Utterback said. "I get so hurried with my children. George reminds me that a little kindness goes a long way with children."

Most of all, Utterback points to Tori, a bright and happy little girl who attends PWP activities with her father.

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Whenever Zobrist needs an emergency babysitter or has questions about childrearing, he turns to his parents, George and Fredi Zobrist, for advice.

Mrs. Zobrist said that Tori is close to both her grandparents and her four cousins, who live with Zobrist's sister Jean Gall in St. Louis. Zobrist has another sister, Barbara, who lives in California.

Mrs. Zobrist credits her son's patience and wisdom for giving Tori a stable upbringing. "George has went beyond my expectations," Mrs. Zobrist said. "I didn't know what to expect, but he is very sensitive to the fact that he is bringing up a female child. He wants her to have plenty of female companions like myself and Jean."

Although Zobrist tends to be a quiet person, Mrs. Zobrist said her son makes an extra effort to expose Tori to other children.

Mrs. Zobrist says that Zobrist encourages Tori to have a relationship with her mother, who now lives in Pennsylvania and sees Tori about once a year. "George makes Tori feel very loved, and very aware of the fact that she has a mother who loves her," Mrs. Zobrist said.

In addition to his continual reliance on his parents, Zobrist said that one of the key lessons he's learned is the importance of parents being firm in their decisions.

"You have to be firm in whatever direction you decide to take," Zobrist said. "You can't let children play with your sympathies."

Because Zobrist does not believe in spanking, he gets his points across by speaking firmly and using words that a 4-year-old can understand. He draws upon his childhood experience by instilling rules such as "no jumping in the house," which his mother applied to Zobrist when he was younger.

Zobrist also realizes that he needs time to himself as an adult, but he believes that this time will come as Tori grows older. "I will always have time to go out when Tori is older and in her teens," Zobrist said. "I see my time with Tori as precious."

Missourian photographer Chris Chung contributed to this story.

ZOBRIST: Single dad uses patience, wisdom

From Page 7A

of the week

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Bringing up a girl

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June 18, 1995 (page 1G)

Parent Support

Parents Without Partners is an all-volunteer support group dedicated to improving the quality of life for single parents and their children.

The international organization's Columbia chapter offers educational and social activities almost every day.

The Columbia chapter is comprised of about 300 members of all ages.

The membership includes young parents, parents with grown children and grandparents. The median age is 44.

The organization's programs are divided equally between low- or no-cost family activities and adult educational and social activities. The educational programs address issues ranging from finances to single parents who date. PWP also sponsors a dance on the third Saturday of every month at the American Legion Hall on Route WW. The dance is open to the public.

Upcoming PWP events include a family float trip in July and an August outing to the Lake of the Ozarks.

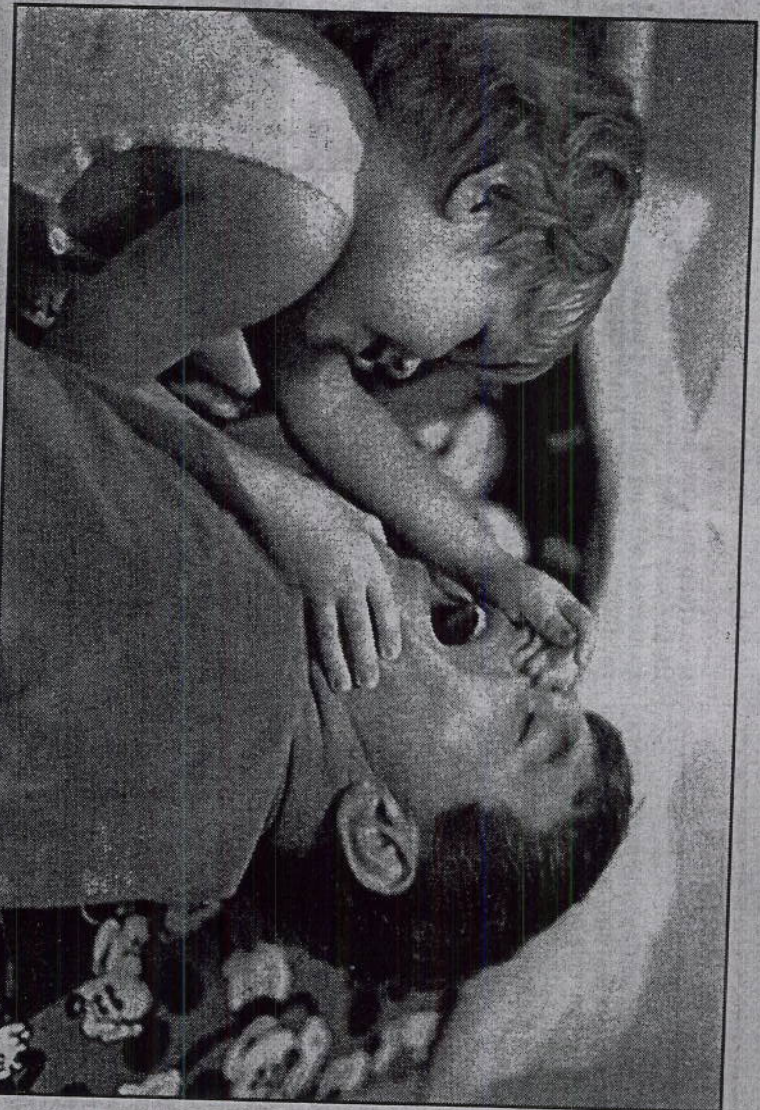
In addition to the \$25 annual membership fee, the only requirement is that prospective members be single parents with a living child. Custody or the children's ages are not a consideration.

PWP's next prospective member informational meeting will be 7 p.m. on Tuesday in the Columbia Public Library's Friends Room. The library is located at the corner of Garth and Broadway.

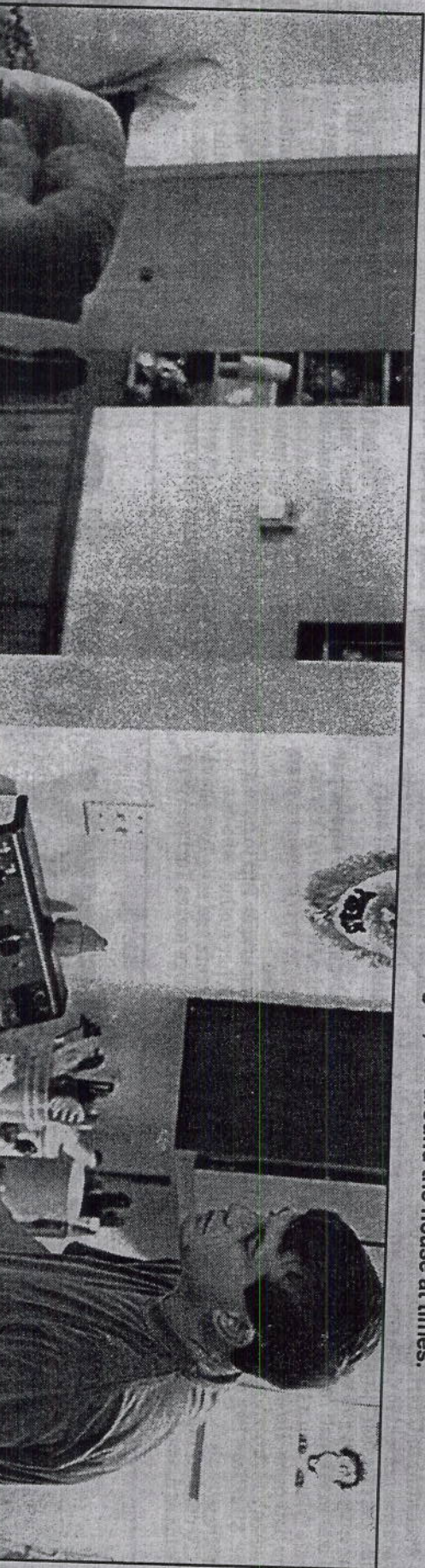
For information, call 443-7316.

& his daughter

ers, the *Missourian* pays tribute to overlooked — single fathers. their children, they are learning the home and raise children. a is one man who changed role to take care of his daughter, Tori.

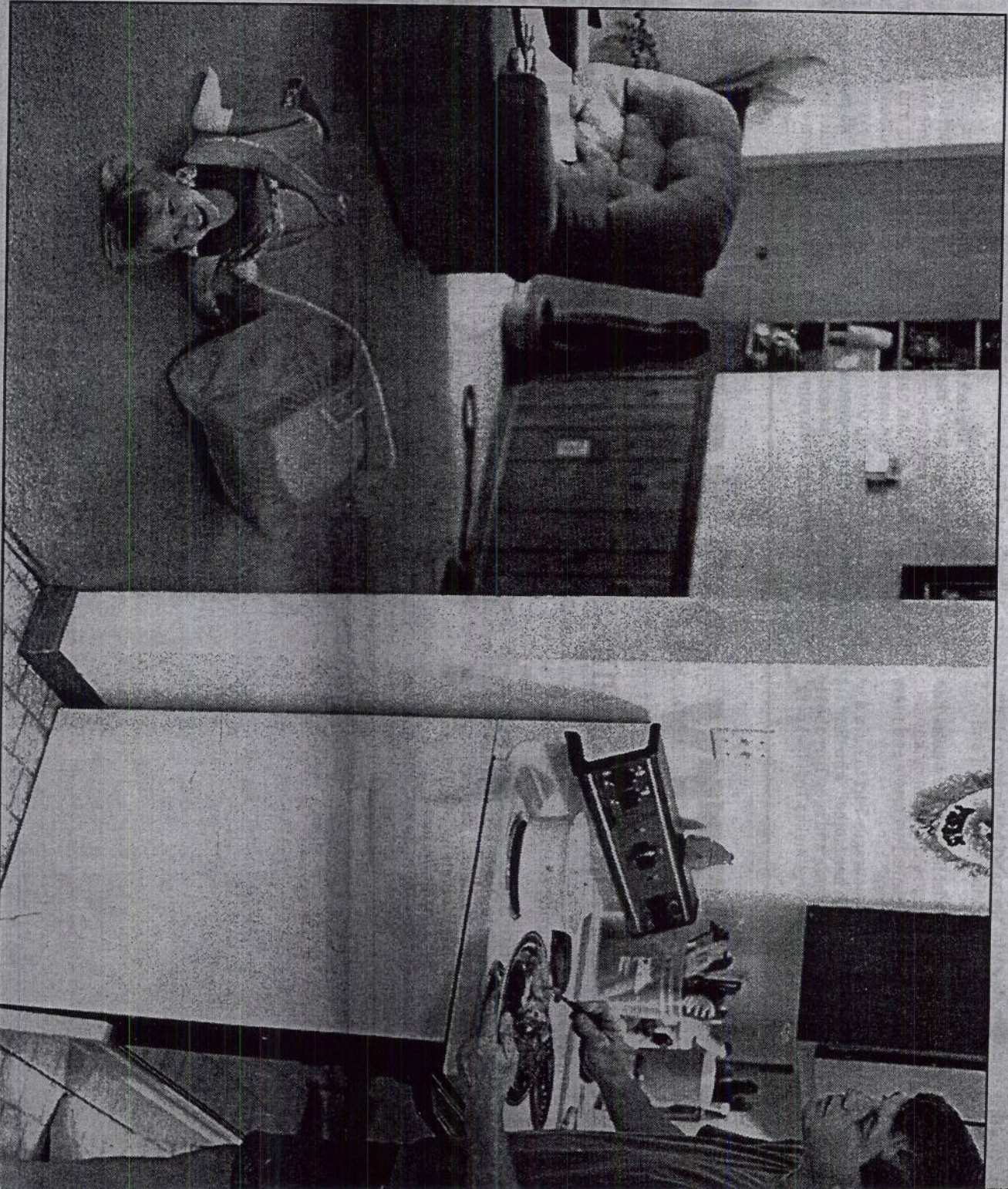


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Story by TERESA HEINZ
Photos by CHRIS CHUNG
of the Missourian staff

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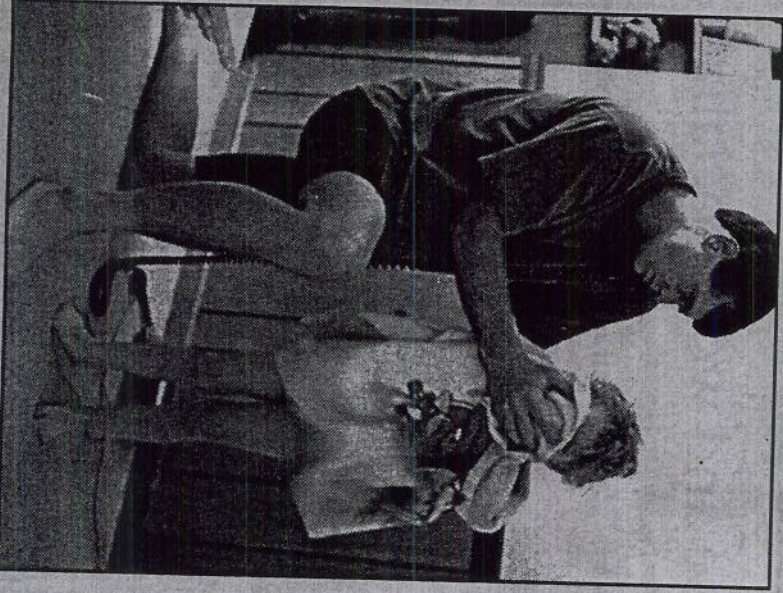
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Please see ZOBRIST, Page 26

As a single father, Zobrist does not want to ensure Tori meets and plays with other children. She says he encourages Tori to have a relationship with her mother, who now lives in Pennsylvania and sees Tori about once a year. "George makes Tori feel very

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