

My View

Stepping up to protect a son's feelings

"Jim, they're treating our department like a red-headed stepchild."

I was sitting in a morning meeting when a co-worker used these words. A simple five-word phrase I'd heard many times before, but one that never

stopped wounding. Because, often-times, we're never quite sure what people have in their backgrounds when we speak. And, you see, I happen to have a stepson.

As the meeting continued, I thought more about the phrase "like a red-headed stepchild" and how it is used so easily. But I also thought about how I had never seen anyone taken to task for using that expression.

Obviously, the man across the table had no idea that the words could be offensive. I know him as someone who would rather die than hurt someone's feelings.

However, I was thinking seriously of stopping the meeting and pointing out that you can't tell a man is a stepfather just by looking at him. But I didn't.

Because my business associate was only trying to explain that he thought our department was being short-changed by the company. For him, the phrase was merely a way of describing how it feels to not be treated as well as someone else.

But that's where the problem comes in. Because the phrase implies that a stepchild is less than a biological child, someone who a parent can like, and possibly love, but never to the same degree as his or her biological child.

And, as I came to that realization, I mentally flew back in time to the day when Gina, Jeremy and I got married. When I stood at the front of the church, waiting as she and Jeremy walked down the aisle. There I stood, frozen in the wonder of watching her, a white flame, holding the hand of this little boy who was all dressed up in a tuxedo and who was about to become my son.



By Jim Warda

In the middle of the ceremony, the three of us exchanged vows. After Gina and I spoke of truth and promises, I knelt down, looked into Jeremy's eyes and said, "I promise to always guide you, protect you and, most of all, love you." Then I picked him up, kissed his forehead and we lit a candle, where three became one.

Since then, I have had very little use for the word "stepson." Not that I'm ashamed of the word, which has its uses, but because, for me, there's little reason to describe Jeremy as anything but my son. Since our wedding day, he has become even more to me.

Because I have sat with him on fever-filled nights, feeling the helplessness that parents know when they can do little else but hold their child.

Because I learned to become a dad when I still wasn't sure how to be man, looking in amazement at the back seat of my car where a child's car seat replaced softball bats and compact discs.

Because, although the courts don't take much notice of stepparents in legal matters, I will fight until my last breath to protect him.

Because I have answered his questions about girls and sex while looking everywhere but his eyes, not knowing how much I should say and whether I was using the right words.

Because when Matthew, my sec-

ond son, was born, we were amazed by how much he and Jeremy looked alike. But the moment he was born and Jeremy held him in the hospital room, the two of them became brothers. Forged so tight that there was not enough space between Jeremy's arm and Matthew's cheek for a word like "half" to enter.

Because parents are made by what they do every day, by showing up at Little League games and school plays, by bandaging cuts and pushing swings, and pretending they're sleeping so their children can jump on them.

Because when Jeremy hands me a Father's Day card, it means just as much as if he were my biological son. In fact, it means something else, too, because I chose him.

I made the decision to bring him into my life, to take on the responsibility of raising him, of helping him become true and brave and willing to stand for what needs to be stood for.

And isn't that what love is all about? About being there through the hard times, when it would be so much easier to turn away, when all you really want to do is say, "Well, it's been fun," and walk out the door to a simpler, but lonelier, life.

But the moment I married Gina and Jeremy, I made a promise. A promise that I'd always be there, a promise that I would do my best to make them proud, and a promise that, from that day on, Jeremy would be my son.

That is why I will speak up next time when the phrase "like a red-headed stepchild" is used.

Because, first of all, I know many fine red-headed people.

And, second, but most of all, I know one little boy who, though he may not share my blood, most definitely has my heart.

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