

## NONCUSTODIAL MOMS



"I'm moving back to Pennsylvania," he said to her over the telephone one Sunday night.

"We'll have to figure out the visitation," Beverly Morris said. "That won't be necessary. I'm taking them to Pennsylvania with me," her ex-husband said. Beverly responded, "over my dead body."

That's how Beverly's nightmare began. Her attorney quickly worked to get an emergency hearing in front of a judge. The day before her ex-husband was to leave Florida to move back north, the judge sat before them. It looked as though the hearing was going her way when the opposing attorney pointed out to the judge that a form was improperly filled.

At 4:30 PM on a Friday afternoon, after a 15 minute hearing, Beverly's two children were awarded to her ex-husband and without even saying goodbye, the children left the state. Her attorney was so devastated that she no longer deals with child custody cases. She refunded Beverly's money and referred her to several other attorneys. In calling them Beverly found they all wanted \$20,000-\$30,000 as a retainer to work on an out-of-state case, something she did not have.

"The custodial parent has too much power," Beverly said. "Custody of children is not a mother or father issue; it is a parent issue. Divorce may bring conflict between the parents, but the children should not lose the opportunity to share equal time with both parents."

"I've remarried," she shared. "And I have a second daughter, Stephanie, and sometimes when I have taken her to dance class or other outings, I meet other mothers. Frequently they ask how many children I have. When I say three, they ask where the other two go to school. When I reply they live in Pennsylvania with their father, you can almost see the thoughts go before their eyes. There's almost a slight movement away from me," Beverly said.

"There is a stigma attached to being a noncustodial mother," she said. In the 1800's when women and children were property, children were given to the father if there was a divorce. Later in the 1900's as women received the vote and were given a voice, children were awarded custody to the mother. Today there is movement to place more fathers custodial roles.

"Most people think of dads as the noncustodial parents, but there are 3 million noncustodial mothers out there too," said David Levy, CEO of the Children's Rights Council. "They are kind of the hidden folks."

"Just a few years ago people thought mothers that didn't have custody of their children were unfit. But unfit and noncustodial are not synonymous," Beverly stated emphatically.

"Some women have lost custody after the divorce when it becomes necessary to work two jobs to keep food on the table," she said. "When the father finds out, he'll go to court and state he works fewer hours and the children would be better off living with him. And others are victim to a court travesty, like I was. Some mothers relinquish custody of their children for the children's best interest."

It's the little things that really hurt," Beverly said thoughtfully. "A few months ago, my nine year old daughter wanted her ears pierced. I had always thought that was a mommy thing to do. One day she excitedly called to say, "Daddy's girlfriend took me to have my ears pieced." She didn't care who took her; she just wanted her ears pierced."

As women have gained better pay, often both parents are equally financially able to take care of the children and courts are giving the dads an opportunity to be the custodial parent.

"You know, you really never come to terms with not having your children with you full-time," she said quietly. "The difficult times are in the transition times, like after the summer vacation, or after a visitation. It's like living a death over and over again."

It was after one of these visitations that Beverly needed a type of support that her new husband just couldn't give her. She turned to the internet to see if she could find other mothers in her same circumstances. She found "tribute" sites where mothers gave a tribute to the children that no longer lived with them, but no one to chat with. She decided create a site too but added a discussion board to her site. Within two weeks 10 women had come to her site and began to share. She was overwhelmed. That was in November of 2002.

This is how NANCM (National Association of Noncustodial Moms) began. "I had no idea, in the beginning, an organization would be born of my need. I just wanted to talk to someone who knew what I was going through. I have a wonderful husband and he is extremely supportive, to the point of even giving financial support to NANCM, but he really couldn't share my pain," Beverly said. "He didn't fully understand it."

Annette Pagano, author of *Journeys of Women Without Custody*, visited the site and Beverly and she became friends. Annette is on the Board of Directors of NANCM. After a year they had 600 women from all over the world actively using the discussion board. This is becoming a world issue.

The site is free to everyone. The organization functions because of contributions. They recently received a 501(c)(3) status from the IRS.

"We are a group of women who truly understand what noncustodial fathers go through. We are not a mother's advocate group," Beverly said. "Sometimes people have this misconception."

"Our organization is a support site for mothers without custody of their children. We want to help parents understand how to co-parent, give them support, and help them heal emotionally. We believe that children have a right to both fit and loving parents in their life," Beverly said. "We especially want noncustodial moms to know they are not alone."

If you know a noncustodial mother, tell her to check out the web site [www.nancm.org](http://www.nancm.org). Or tell her about the first national convention of NANCM to be held June 17th and 18th, 2006, at Summer Bay Resort in Clermont, Florida. Beverly, Annette Pagano, Dr. Kathie Mathis, Annie Arman, David Levy, Jim Loose, and Celeste Chappell-Bates will all be speakers at this event. Registration can be made by visiting the site.

~ Margaret Andersen