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WRITERS AT WORK

Expanding the Story of Single Parents: Bringing the Vision to Completion through Writing and Editing

Cathryne L. Schmitz

Writers at Work

This issue of *Families in Society* marks the inauguration of "Writers at Work," a section of the journal created to allow readers to "meet" authors and learn about the personal inspirations and influences that compel them to write for publication. In this issue, writer Cathryne Schmitz tells us about what it was like for her to bring into existence her forthcoming book *Diversity in Single-Parent Families: Working from Strength*. We hope hers will be the first of many such personal essays and invite you to share your literary experiences with our readers.

— Howard Goldstein, Editor

Three years after the first inspiration, January 1999 will see the publication of *Diversity in Single-Parent Families: Working from Strength*. This book, which I co-edited with Susan Tebb, Dean of the School of Social Service at Saint Louis University, is shaped out of our experiences, both professional and personal. It brings to light the strengths, struggles, and empowerment needs of single-parent families and highlights the diversity represented by the families and communities. Our goal was to tap the wealth of knowledge social work practitioners working in and with diverse communities have about the resources available and the difficulties they face. We wanted to reveal the wonderful mosaic formed by many courageous families.

We know the problems of family life from inside out having experienced single parenthood — one author is widowed; the other divorced. We have lived the op-

portunities and struggles. At the same time, our professional experience with divorcing and separating families, with adoption, community work, counseling, child welfare, and child mental health broadened our exposure to the diverse realities that single-parent families endure. We have learned that single-parent families occupy the same continuum as two-parent families — from the position of what might be considered the outstanding family to the other extreme occupied by families that are very problematic. Most families, however, exist somewhere in the middle, struggling to do their best with the financial and emotional resources available to them.

Single-parent families, like two-parent families, represent many sizes, colors, ethnicities, and configurations. They are formed through divorce, separation, and widowhood as well as adoption, choice, and accident; yet they are frequently lumped together as one

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group and characterized as problematic only because they happen to be single-parent families. Their successes tend to go unnoticed, and they are more often criticized and assumed to be dysfunctional. This stigmatization makes it difficult for families to earn the positive recognition and support they need.

To bring together this anthology, the price of considerable time and persistence was imposed on the editors and the contributors representing many communities and backgrounds. For each author, writing started with passion combined with her/his own knowledge, experience, and vision. The process of moving from that initial vision to the final product was challenging but eventually rewarding. We learned, as editors and authors, some of the daunting hazards that go along with writing, editing, and publishing a work that we believe in.

Let me start with the struggles I always face when I begin to write a serious work. I had few doubts about the information I wanted to share . . . still, the internal resistance to the process was, as always, difficult to overcome. At times, I just sat and wrote whatever thoughts and ideas came to mind (forgoing perfection) in order to move beyond the resistance. The first several drafts were laborious. I had to muster all my will to continue to write. Eventually, enough data were amassed to allow me to feel that I could polish and refine what I had written. At that point, the pain of writing lessened and even started to become more rewarding and *fun*.

But the requirements of editing and publishing added their own frustrations. Finding a match between a publisher and the book took research, thought, and negotiation. The editing process involved more than words and pages: it was also necessary to encourage and keep the chapter authors motivated throughout the process of editing for style, consistency, and quality and the final negotiations for publication. The challenge of bringing together a complex of authors brought with it the excitement of discovering the wealth of knowledge and experience they could offer. Multiple authors, however, also meant multiple personal styles requiring flexibility, patience, and a sense of humor on our part as editors. Some authors worked efficiently and compulsively to finish their respective chapters. Most, however, struggled, procrastinated, and floundered. As an editor, it was my responsibility to encourage, offer suggestions, and monitor to assure consistency in style across the chapters. Finally, the publisher edited each chapter, requiring additional revisions by the authors who believed their work was already done. This last push was perhaps the hardest. Support and assurances had to be provided as the authors incorporated editorial feedback and sometimes had to let go of cherished words and ideas. Together, we survived; sharing a complement of stories we hoped would be meaningful to our readers.

Vision and Motivation

There were a number of impressions and concerns about sin-

gle-parent families that inspired Susan Tebb and me to tackle this urgent project. First was the sparsity of the literature on their diversity and strengths. We hoped to pull together material that would enrich our collective dialogue about families that happen to share the title, *single-parent family*. And so we each searched for authors with experience in and expertise about families from many communities who are seldom discussed in the literature.

We were aware that some of the common struggles shared by single-parent families — particularly female-headed families — are poverty, inadequate social and emotional support, and negative images perpetuated by the media, teachers, the broader community, and at times the social work profession itself. We found that social work professionals all too often make the job of single parenting more difficult by falling back on the kind of stereotypical thinking that implies that women cannot raise children alone although it is common knowledge that many strong, positive single-parent families have always done so. Social workers too often create a sense of foreboding for families; a sense of doom and difficulty instead of promise and hope by focusing primarily on stories of failures and anxiety.

We believed — and, of course, still do — that social workers can expand their vision of single-parent families by learning and sharing stories of success. When social workers grow through listening to families tell their stories, they become educators and advocates for fam-

ilies by sharing these stories with teachers, community leaders, and the media. They can convey the hope and strength of single-parent families and the children nurtured within them.

Again, we believed — and still do — that single parents need acceptance and support — social, emotional, and financial. Single-parent families are strengthened through respect, recognition, and encouragement. Approaches offering respect to the single-parent family as a functioning system based on a perspective of strength are included in this book. The authors of the chapters offer insight into many of the issues faced and resources available. Some of the resources that can buffer and protect families include extended family, community networks, and cultural/spiritual beliefs, attitudes, and history.

Of course, children need a supportive family to thrive. Regardless of a family's configuration, children flourish when they are provided with respect, love, and a structure of guidance, consistency, and support. Understanding the family as well as its community provides social

workers with a knowledge of the context that might provide support and positive attitudes. Social workers who balance their understanding of a single-parent family by their responsiveness to diversity, to strengths as well as hardships, can help the family rewrite its story in a way that supports and facilitates the creation of a climate that energizes single parents and their children. In the development of an active parent-social worker partnership, social workers appreciate that the parent is the expert in her/his situation having lived and experienced it. Together, the parent and social worker maximize their collective expertise. But the authors of many of the chapters also remind the social worker to look beyond the immediate family to also maximize the help available — to the kinship network, cultural values, community, and the role of spirituality and religion.

The final product is our reward. Through the efforts of sixteen authors, including the editors, issues of poverty, race, gender, disability, sexuality, and choice are covered. Chapters on African American, Latino/a,

Asian Pacific American, American Indian/Alaskan Native, gay/lesbian families, and rural single-parent families dealing with issues of poverty, race, gender, disability, sexuality, and choice took shape. Also included, are chapters on single fathers, single-parent families with children with disabilities, and single grandparents raising the children of drug-abusing parents.

The process and the product touched the hearts and lives of all the authors who share an investment in the plight of children facing risk due to lack of financial, social, and societal support. Therefore, the dilemma of equity in the use of any profits which may arise from the sale of the book was an easy one. The authors and editors collectively agreed to donate the profits from the sale of this book to the Children's Defense Fund, an organization advocating nationally in the United States on behalf of children, youth, and families.

Cathryne L. Schmitz is assistant professor, School of Social Work, University of Denver. She and Susan Tebb are co-editors of the book, Diversity in Single-Parent Families: Working from Strength, which will be published in 1999 by Families International, Inc., in association with Family Service America.