



by Karen Stephens

# Step-Parents: There's More to Parenting Than Bloodlines

For a semester during his college junior year, my step-son lived in Cincinnati. At age 21, he went into the big wide world for a college internship in a large corporation. And he earned money doing it! (Maybe that college education would pay off!)

Derek's now 32, married, and living on his own, but I remember that semester vividly. It was the first time he lived away from us. Sure, he had lived in residence halls, but living with other students had never seemed as foreboding as him living ALONE in a big city.

Academically, we knew the internship would be good. Derek's social contacts would expand with new sports buddies and new girls to date. And it was a great occupational opportunity.

But lurking behind our enthusiasm were demons that terrorize all parents. What if he got hurt with no one there to help him? What if the BIG corporation took advantage of our LITTLE boy or treated him mean? We'd be so far away . . .

But of course, that was the point. It's hard for kids to master independence without a little distance from mom and pop.

So even though I knew this move was a good thing, I was nervous. And anyone who came within talking distance knew about Derek's GIANT step away from home. It was a transition I had to talk through over and over again.

Some thought I was silly. Even good friends said things like, "Well, it's not like he is your own kid, Karen; don't worry about it so much." More than once people remarked (with poorly masked shock), "Well, you sound like a *real* mother or something!"

You see, step-parents are often thought of as impostors. Comments like that would insult adoptive parents, but step-parents are supposed to understand and accept that we are merely secondhand stand-ins for the "real thing." Lucky for me, I've had Derek to remind me it takes more than bloodlines to be a mom, in the best sense of the word.

Unexpectedly, his move ended up reassuring me that our "step" relationship wasn't a "step down" for him. With his move, distance not only made my heart grow fonder, but my eyes see clearer!

After he settled in, his dad and I visited to experience Derek's new "city life." For the first time, he made plans for us and not the other way around! And boy, did he ever do a great job!

When we graced his doorstep, he proudly ushered us into his efficiency apartment furnished with cardboard boxes and milk crates — and one pitifully wilted philodendron.

“ . . . to see  
details of  
myself  
revealed in  
someone  
without a  
drop of my  
blood was a  
wonderful,  
surprising  
view.”

As I put down my suitcase, I noticed gifts on each bed pillow. Not only was the munchkin letting us have his mattress for the weekend, but he had presents awaiting us. And these weren't just any gifts. They were gifts he put some thought into. On Dad's side was the latest book from a favorite author. On my side was a sweatshirt with a Cincinnati steamboat paddling across the front.

Now this may seem trivial to you, but it was a sentimental tear-jerker for me. Why? You see, through work I travel a bit. Every time I go to a new state or city, I buy Derek a t-shirt with the location's name on it. He has a collection that would line the walls of a tourist bureau (ranging from kid's small to man's XL).

So it turns out, the visit was wrapping up a big circle for us. Now it was Derek traveling, and giving me mementos rather than the other way around. We'd come full circle. And it was the sweetest thing to have love I'd given spring back to me in such a touching way! I've always believed action speaks louder than words, and Derek's shot straight to the heart.

He arranged the whole weekend around our interests. We love blues music, he found us a great show. We relish spicy food; he made sure we had the best barbeque Cincinnati had to offer.

Suffice it to say, I was greatly relieved after our visit. Derek was surviving in the city. He could maneuver rush-hour traffic. He could hold his own at the job. And his bathroom was clean . . . well, better than I expected, at least.

I remember gushing to a friend: "I just can't believe how much he's grown up in so little time. And he's such a considerate host! Where did he learn to be so darn nice?"

It was my friend's turn to be incredulous, "What are you talking about? He learned it from you!" Me????? "You leave welcoming gifts on guest's pillows all the time. And his Dad is forever sharing music CDs with him."

She was convincing. I started letting us take a tiny bit of credit for Derek being such a swell guy. But many others have had a hand in it, too. His No. 1 Mom, his grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, coaches, friends, and school teachers have all contributed to Derek's character.

But I have to admit, pieces of me, reflected in Derek, was something I had never anticipated. After all, I'm "just" his step-mom. I contributed time, but not chromosomes. So to see details of myself revealed in someone without a drop of my blood was a wonderful, surprising view.

Thank you, Derek. You've made being a step-parent rewarding. And though you don't have a strand of my DNA, you'll always have the better part of my soul.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.