

## **Mutual Love of Children Unites Mom and Stepmom**

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We first met nine years ago. My yet-to-be stepson was performing in his middle-school choir. It was a sticky late spring day, and Brian, my soon-to-be husband, and I had just come from a Phillies game. More nervous than I let on, I felt like I had just gotten off the field myself. Stephanie and Brian were at the end of a difficult divorce, and since his descriptions of her were sometimes less than flattering, I was half expecting to meet a crinkly, cranky, unkempt woman.

But instead it was worse – much worse. She was the grown-up version of the petite, perky cheerleader I both envied and loathed in high school: disarmingly friendly, very beautiful, and very blonde. Not surprisingly, her kids adored her. And, quite surprisingly, (or “Soon”?) I would (come to) as well.

There are no card categories in Hallmark describing who Stephanie and I are to each other. She is the mother of my children. She is my husband’s ex-wife. I am her children’s stepmom and her ex-husband’s wife. These awkward titles often lead to more questions than answers. And though accurate, they fail to recognize, let alone honor, the unique and powerful nature of the relationship we have formed.

People say that when you marry a man you marry his family – often referring to his parents; that is even more true when you marry a man with young children and a resolutely involved former wife.

I can't imagine how hard it must have been for Stephanie to share the people she loved most in the world – her children - with the person she may have liked least in the world, her ex-husband, and then trust them with a woman she had absolutely no say in approving. Stephanie had every reason to dislike me just because of my role, as did the kids. But instead of condemning me, or worse, she gave me a chance - and even more generously, gave her children permission to get to know, and eventually love me. A mother's love doesn't get bigger than that.

Perhaps love stretches us, and makes us bigger on the inside. Certainly child birth involves a physical stretching followed by a miracle. And becoming a step-mom is its own labor of love, one that involves lots of stretching, and spawns many miracles.

Though we share custody of the kids and they have less time with each of us, they also have more love. And can anybody have too much love - too many adults reminding them of their beauty, and embracing them as much for their imperfections as for their strengths? I don't think so. And neither, it seems, does Stephanie. We have shared the two most intimate relationships a woman can have: husbands and children. It's not always easy, but that's what makes it satisfying.

Perhaps the reason Hallmark doesn't have a category celebrating this unique relationship is because there are so few examples of successful mom/step-mom relationships. Not only do childhood fairy tales, think Cinderella's evil step-mother, haunt us, but even scarier are the televised portrayals of women raging and undermining each other like in the Real Housewives franchise.

Stephanie and I are co-mom's coordinating childcare, car pools and doctor visits. She is better at broken bones; I am better at broken hearts. She is Mischief Night, I am Day of Service. We aren't best friends, but I consider her part of my family. And while it's not a relationship either of us dreamed of having, it is one I certainly would fight for.

Someone asked me after I had recently wed, "Isn't it hard to love someone else's kids?" I answered, "Not if you love them like your own." I am not their mother, but in my heart and in daily life, Andrew and Becca are my children.

Becca once told me she was happy Stephanie and I get along so well. I answered, "I love your mom. She gave me you." And it's true. I love Stephanie. Not only because she is my children's mother, but also because she gave me my children, twice—first by physically bringing them into the world, and then by giving them permission to bring me into their worlds.

So there is no name for who we are to each other. There's just an abundance of pride and appreciation for what our mutual love for our children has called forth between us. And that may not be what "real housewives" are about, but I do believe it's what "real mothers" are about.