

Fathers group looks out for dads, kids

Organization helps educate parents on custody rights

BY LEE REINSCH

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BELLEVUE — When parents of young kids divorce, in most cases, the mother gets custody. Fathers get visitation rights.

That term rankles the dads involved in Wisconsin Fathers for Children and Families.

"What parent wants to be called a visitor to their own child?" Bellevue dad Marc Kotz said.

The issue of fathers' rights goes beyond just verbiage, though, say these dads. Kotz brought a chapter of the Madison-based group to Northeastern Wisconsin earlier this year.

The group aims to educate fathers of their rights and help them go about mediating custody-related disputes for the best interests of all involved.

"There are a lot of reasons fathers are viewed as not being a preferable parent," Kotz said. "Certainly, the whole deadbeat dad thing has shaped public awareness. We don't really contest that there needs to be follow-up on child support, but that image and perception tends to extend to all dads in general, and that is a very unfortunate result."

The group's platform is that children need both parents, and that any parent who wants to be involved in their child's life should not be denied it because of an unequal custody arrangement, Kotz said.

Unequal custody fuels fights and lawsuits, he said.

"If there is not a presumption of equal placement, the system encourages litigation," Kotz said. "The more placement one parent has, the more money the other party pays in child support."

The group's mission, he says, is to "even the playing field and make it possible for all parents to have access and involvement in their children's life."

The group strives to get an

Treat dad to a meal

■ The Salvation Army will honor local fathers with a free picnic and church service at 10:30 a.m. today at the Bay Beach Amusement Park picnic area, shelter No. 7, 1313 Bay Beach Road, Green Bay. Each father will receive a special gift.

■ The Dad's Club will provide brunch from 8 to 10 a.m. today at the Golden Corral, 2590 Holmgren Way, Ashwaubenon. The club asks that men help children from broken homes by bringing them to share and celebrate the day. The Golden Corral will sponsor the first 20 children who attend.

■ Cold Stone Creamery in the Green Bay and Fox Valley area are offering dads a free "love it"-sized ice cream today. Locations are the Fox River Mall in Grand Chute; 3420 E. Calumet St., Appleton; and 2101 S. Oneida St., Suite 300, Ashwaubenon.

What's next?

Who: Green Bay Chapter of Wisconsin Fathers for Family and Children

What: Fathers Night Out

Typically meets: First Monday of every month — July schedule is atypical because of July Fourth holiday and Walk For Children special event on Aug. 1.

Next meetings: 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. July 9; and 6:30 p.m. July 31 at Titledown Brewing, 200 Dousman St., Green Bay.

Where: Titledown Brewing, 200 Dousman St., Green Bay.

Purpose: To help dads with custody issues, network and find solutions.

Dues: \$30 per year.

More information: (920) 863-6362 or via e-mail at newdads@earthlink.net

Contact: www.wisconsinfathers.org; Hot line: (608) All-DADS

Coming up

Wisconsin father Peter Kerr, who is staging a walk across Wisconsin starting Monday, will make his way through Green Bay on Aug. 31. He's slated to be in Jackson Square park in Green Bay, Monroe and Howe streets, between 4 and 5 p.m., where the local Wisconsin Fathers for Children and Families will greet him. Kerr will talk about fatherlessness and its impact on kids. Kerr's walk, named Walk for Children, is backed by the group and the Milwaukee Fatherhood Collaborative. More information on the walk may be found at www.walkforchildren.org.

equal placement law on record. While the group doesn't lobby politicians, it does keep its members aware of what's going on in the state Legislature.

In 2000, Wisconsin changed its statute on child placement to read that courts shall maximize placement to both parents, taking into consideration the varied factors in each situation, Kotz said. But the change hasn't had enough of an impact.

While things have changed

over the past decades, the court system still favors mothers, Kotz said. Which is where Wisconsin Fathers for Children and Families comes in. Locally, around two-dozen men are involved in the group, but statewide, the group numbers around 200.

When Army National Guard

veteran Joe Sommers of Pulaske found himself going through a divorce in 2003, at first he only was able to see his two children two weekends per month and from 4 to 8 p.m. on Wednesdays, he said.

All around, the arrangement really "bit," Sommers said, especially the Wednesday evening visit.

"It didn't allow us to spend quality time together," Sommers said. "By the time you pick them up, feed them, help them with their homework and clean them up, it's time for them to go home. I was like, 'Let them spend the night so I can read them a bedtime story.'"

Making the whole situation worse was that, in the middle of the divorce proceedings — which still aren't over — he was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease.

After much going back and forth with attorneys and his ex-wife, he now has equal custody down to the hour. But it has cost more than \$30,000 in legal fees, he said. It wiped out his assets, including his 401(k) and the children's college fund, he said.

Wisconsin Fathers for Children and Families opens its membership to women — often relatives or spouses of men who are battling child custody issues — but not limited to those relationships.

"There are women who have similar problems in having access to children," Kotz said. "We don't exclude women by any means."

The first Monday of every month is designated as "Fathers Night Out." Members meet at Titledown Brewing, 200 Dousman St., to network, share stories and find answers to their questions. Often the nights out feature speakers — past presenters have included Brown County Circuit Court Judge Kendall Kelley and Rep. Frank Lasee, R-Bellevue. Membership in the group costs \$30 a year.

Students entering grades 5-8 in Fall 2006