

The courts side with mothers 90 percent of the time.

Father Figures

ESSENCE special correspondent **Roland S. Martin** wants to know why dads are put through the ringer when they fight for their parental rights

With his marriage ending, all Jerald* could think of was his two boys. His ten-year union was over by 2002, but he thought the split would be an amicable one and that he would be able to work with his former wife to raise their sons, now 15 and 18. That was a pipe dream. Jerald says his ex, a Baltimore-area law enforcement officer, was so vindictive after the divorce that she did everything she could to keep him from seeing his children, all in an effort to exact revenge for the failure of their marriage.

"It was nuts. I was in court for anything—a parking ticket, whatever she thought might cripple me," says Jerald, 38, a Baltimore financial analyst. At one point, his ex-wife even accused him of being suicidal, and it was up to Jerald to prove that was a lie.

Attorney Jeffery Leving, who has helped men gain parental rights for 26 years and even branded his Web site Dadsrights.com, has seen it all, including men who simply give up under the pressure of a system that disregards them by assuming that the mother knows what's best for the child. But Jerald refused to back down. He was willing to put up with anything as long as it meant his sons would be in his life.

The drama that Jerald had to endure to see his own children isn't all that different from what many men say they face when

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they battle for parental rights. And they are not just fighting their children's mom either. They are fighting a court system that seems to cast a skeptical eye on fathers for wanting to maintain a presence in their child's life.

And frankly, it's a damn shame.

The importance of a loving, committed father isn't just valuable—it's invaluable. While there are men who don't want to man up, there are just as many women out there still bitter over the breakup of a relationship who are using their children to get back at their exes. These women need to set aside evil intentions and let Daddy remain an important part of the child's life. Every relationship isn't perfect, and yes, it might end, but children should not have to go through life with their father at a distance because Mom is a hater.

Oh, don't get me wrong. I know there are a lot of men who are simply sperm donors, willing to drop a seed but run like a punk when it's time to raise the child. My wife and I don't have any kids, but we are helping raise several of our relatives' children because their respective dads are sorry excuses for men, and I refuse to let these children grow up without a strong male presence.

But there are also the Jeralds of the world who want to be there for their children but are forced to fight to stay involved. "It's very difficult. Very emotional. Very stressful. It's on you every day. There's not a day you don't live it," says Jerald of not seeing his boys, adding that at one point his wife refused to let him see the children for three months.

According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the courts side with women 90 percent of the time in custody battles. Leving says men are accused of all kinds of wrongdoing, whether it's Jerald's wife alleging he was suicidal or the wife of one man Leving represented falsely accusing his client of sexually abusing his own child. Of course, the court initially believed the wife, but after Leving's client managed to prove the allegations were not close to the

truth, the judge assigned supervised visitation to the father.

Custody battles seem to be hardest on African-American fathers like Jerald, Leving says, probably because of "the combination of gender discrimination and racial discrimination." But men are increasingly deciding to fight back, forming organizations like the Fatherhood Educational Institute and the Illinois Council on Responsible Fatherhood, which advocate on behalf of men and provide support services to fathers.

As Jerald observes, in the long run it is the outcome that matters, not the hell he was put through. "I got joint legal and physical custody," he says. "I have the kids for four days; she has them for three. That's a great thing considering the system always labels us as deadbeat dads who don't care about our children. But that's not always the case."

*Subject's name and identifying details have been changed.

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