

## **"When You Marry an Enabler: A Note from a Step Dad"**

by Kevin Bottke

It's never easy to blend families. It takes a concerted effort to build positive relationships with step-children and step-siblings. When the children in blended families are young, the transition to adjust to a new parent can be less stressful when everyone has the same parenting goal — to raise healthy, happy and well-adjusted kids. However, what happens if the children involved are not young? What happens if the children involved are adults? And, taking this one step further, what happens if the children involved are dysfunctional adults who have been raised by a chronic enabler? What happens when patterns of negative behavior and equally negative responses have been indelibly forged between parent and child?

I'll tell you what happens. Chaos happens. One crisis after another happens. Pain and heartache happens. Trust me, I know.

Thirteen years ago, Allison and I married. Her son was already an adult. In fact, he walked her down the aisle. I barely knew Christopher at that time. He had acted irresponsible at the wedding, but I didn't think much about it, discounting it as acceptable considering his mother was marrying someone he didn't know very well. At the time, there appeared to be a strong mother and son relationship. I could tell that my wife loved her son very much — that she wanted the best for him.

However, as time went on I could see all types of negative behavior from Christopher that I felt was unacceptable. I come from a very large family where we were always held accountable for our actions, whether they were good, bad or indifferent. I grew up living and working on the family farm. Having extended family around was the norm. We were far from perfect, but we worked hard, played hard, and went to church on Sunday. I don't recall a time in my life when I didn't believe in God.

Allison, however, was raised quite the opposite. She was a child of divorce, raised by a single mother in the projects of Cleveland. She had grown up without faith, experiencing devastating trials and tribulations that altered the course of her life. She was sixteen when she gave birth to Christopher, vowing to be the best mother she could be. Her intentions were honorable. However, her parenting skills were nil. With her emotional and psychological wounds and a total void in any spiritual foundation, Allison was destined for disaster. By the time she came to the end of her road and made a U-Turn toward God, her son was eighteen and firmly entrenched in a world of drugs, alcohol, crime, and sin.

Throughout the early years of our marriage, I began to see repetitive negative behavior in their relationship. Chris would get in trouble and Allison would bail him out. Chris needed money and Allison would lend it. Chris needed help to get settled into yet another apartment and Allison would help furnish the place and sometimes even clean it for him. When he reached the end of the line and wanted to get clean — something that happened every few years — she'd find a way to pay for treatment. Around and around the gerbil wheel turned. It was in insane way to live.

I can now understand what often sent Allison into rescue mode where her own feelings of guilt and blame. She blamed herself for her son's lot in life because of the poor parenting choices she had made. She made excuses for him, justified his behavior, and often shielded him from the consequences of his actions. She believed his excuses and accepted his lies. She had confused enabling with helping.

I could see what Allison was doing wrong. Yet every time I said something it resulted in a bitter argument. Every time I tried to draw a line in the sand it was met with resistance. Allison was unable to see how her pattern of enabling allowed her son to continue his own negative behavior. Quite frankly, at the time I didn't have it all figured out either. I am not able to see this clearly only through retrospective wisdom. When we were living in the ongoing drama and chaos that comprised Christopher's life, I didn't always respond in a positive manner. Often, in my desire to help my step-son turn his life around, and to make my wife happy, I sometimes fell into my own enabling patterns. I went out on a limb more than a few times trying to help Christopher to help himself. I was often at wits end. I didn't know quite what to do to stop the insanity that had become our life.

I wish I could say that I lovingly helped my wife to become strong in being able to define her boundaries with her adult child. I wish I could say that together we embarked on a journey to gain sanity in an insane situation. I wish I could say a great many things that were often left unsaid. The fact is, my wife made the difficult choice on her own to change her behavior and her responses to her son. I couldn't change her — she had to change herself. However, the U-turn in Allison's enabling journey came partly as a result of a major melt-down I had in my life after a particularly devastating episode with Christopher.

Allison has painted a vivid picture in her book of what it was like for her that cold January evening when the SWAT team raided her son's home. Christopher had been taken to jail before we arrived. Once again, Allison felt compelled to pick up the pieces. I felt compelled to help my wife. Yet, deep inside my belly a festering anger brewed that would soon erupt as verbal volcanic fire — spewing out vile words, accusations and ultimatums the likes of which my wife had never before heard — at least not from me. In her book, she spared readers my ugly response. I share it with you now.

A few weeks before, my sons had joined me at Christopher's to help build a ramp on the back stairs so Chris could navigate his wheelchair in and out of the house. He'd had an accident on his motorcycle and had been critically injured. At that time, Allison had prepared the home for his return, making it warm, comfortable, clean, and inviting. Now, it looked like a bomb had exploded inside.

The night was cold and dark. My adult children had come from their homes to help us load up Christopher's possessions so they wouldn't be stolen. We had been told that Chris would most likely be in jail for quite a long time. Below zero weather made the frequent trips from his house to our truck all the more uncomfortable. I boarded up broken doors and windows while fuming inside.

On our way home later that night, I screamed and yelled at my wife. I felt the veins popping out on my neck. I cursed her son and I cursed her, saying that never again would I get involved in Christopher's life. I'd had enough and this was it. I regurgitated countless incidents in the past where she made excuses for him, adding insult to injury. I poured salt on the open wound of her heart.

I hurt my wife deeply that night. I'm not proud of that. Yes, for me, for us, I had to get to that place of utter exhaustion with the insanity and willingly had it over to God.

I wish I knew then what I know now. I'd have responded to the choices my wife was making in a much different manner. I'd have defined my boundaries more clearly at the start. We serve no useful purpose when we jump on someone else's bandwagon and perpetuate negative behavior in order to keep the peace — in order to make someone happy.

If you love someone who is an enabler you can't change them. But you can change yourself. I had to clearly state my boundaries. I had to declare that enough was enough. I had to reach the end of myself before my wife was able to see the part she played in the ongoing chaos and crisis that was her son's life.

I was lucky. I was blessed. Allison was able to choose our marriage above the negative behavior and choices of her adult child. She began slowly to separate herself from the life of her son. She began to develop what we now know as the 6 Steps to SANITY. It wasn't easy. I know her heart ached. Yet from the ashes of that despair a book was born that has become a powerful resource for parents and grandparents around the world. Allison walked the painful journey and came out on the other side a better person. A stronger person. A more balanced person. She had found peace and joy in the pain of change. Our marriage survived. Many don't.

And, through it all, Christopher has started a new journey. He is drug free. His faith has grown stronger, his anger has dissipated, and his ability to accept the consequences for his actions is making him the kind of man God wants him to be. I would imagine his growing sense of self-respect, even as he serves his time in prison, is something that makes him stand taller.

Tough love isn't easy — that's why it's tough. However, in some instances the only way for hope and healing to take place will be to walk through the refining fire of pain. If you follow the 6 Steps to SANITY my wife has outlined in her book, I guarantee you things will change. It won't always feel good. You'll most likely see a lot of dark places before the light of healing shines through. But hang in there. Don't give up. Let God do what God does best. Let God restore your life. God never said it would be easy. But He does tell us we don't have to be alone.