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Single father Rodney Evans sat with his two daughters, 11-year-old Jenifer, left, and 7-year-old Janice yesterday near the Ala Wai Canal. They like to visit the park and take a walk along the canal every day.

## More single dads are leading families

### Many fathers say raising children alone poses some challenges

By Sally Apgar

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When Jenifer Evans needed a sixth-grade graduation dress, her dad took her to Sears. Jenifer, 11, rolled her eyes as her dad rummaged through the glitzy-big-girl-prom-dress rack.

"Dad! You don't even know what you are looking for!" joked Rodney Evans, imitating the voice of his irked daughter.

But her offended fashion senses were instantly appeased when her dad pulled out the perfect dress: a red Hawaiian print with spaghetti straps.

The daily life of a single father has many rough moments, said Evans, 40, who is raising daughters Jenifer and Janice, 5, alone. He has had temporary sole custody since 2000.

As a single dad, Evans is part of the fastest growing demographic segment in the country. According to the most recent U.S. Census taken in 2000, the number of households headed by single fathers increased nationally by almost 62 percent between 1990 and 2000. The census found that the number of households headed by single fathers rose from 1.35 million in 1990 to almost 2.2 million in 2000.

In Hawaii, there are 8,945 single dads like Evans who head a household with children under 18, according to the census. About 2 percent of all households in Hawaii are headed by single fathers, which is close to the national average of 2.1 percent. The census reported that men now account for one-sixth of the nation's 11.9 million single parents.

"The number of households headed by single fathers has been increasing in a consistent fashion over the last 30 years," said Martin O'Connell, chief of the fertility and family statistics branch of the census. "The rate has almost doubled every ten years."

Given the way the census information is reported, a single dad could be living in a household where women and relatives are present to help with child care. He could also have joint custody of his child.

The number of households headed by single moms still far outpaces those of single dads. In Hawaii, the 2000 census found 23,619 households headed by single moms or 5.9 percent of all households in the state.

Experts attribute the rise in single fathers to social, cultural and family law changes.

Since the feminist movement in the 1970s, when women started seeking new roles, men were given permission over the decades to be more nurturing and take a greater role in raising their children. And with more women taking full-time jobs, child care had to

become a shared responsibility.

"It's more socially accepted; in fact, it now is almost socially required that fathers take an active role in their children's lives," said Marcia Hartsock, project director for Hawaii Kids Count, a data-driven children's advocacy program at the Center for the Family at the University of Hawaii-Manoa.

Sylvia Yuen, director of the Center for the Family, agrees that there has been an attitudinal shift.

"Mothers are no longer considered the only ones capable of caring for children," said Yuen. "Courts today are more open to awarding custody to the father and to listening to what the children want. The courts are also more likely to grant joint custody than ever before."

The census shows that 37 percent of all single parents -- moms and dads -- are divorced and that 41 percent have never been married. Another 14 percent are separated, 4 percent are married but not living with their spouse and 4 percent are widowed.

Evans, who falls in the group of divorced dads with sole custody, said other people don't always understand his role. After graduating from UH-West Oahu with degrees in economics, business administration and philosophy, Evans was glad to move out of his old Waipahu neighborhood.

"The men there would sit outside and laugh at me and ridicule me as I walked by with my two daughters and bags of groceries," said Evans. "They asked, what kind of man does dishes, laundry and homework with his kids?"

Evans has just moved to a new apartment near UH-Manoa, where he will begin study in August for a master's degree in business administration. Evans, like other single-parent students at UH (who are mostly women), depends on public assistance, tutoring jobs that pay \$9.45 an hour and the help of Bridge to Hope, a UH organization that helps single parents finish school.

"The juggle is the hardest part," said Evans. "I try to schedule my work and my classes around my children's school. But sooner or later you have to hire someone or bring the children with you. "

Evans said his daughters have come to classes and either sat inside doing their homework or played quietly outside. Classmates and coworkers have also been a big help.

"I'm not sure yet, what I'm going to do at Manoa. All of my classes are scheduled at night," said Evans.

Experts say single dads have many of the same problems that single moms do. In general, they have less education and lower incomes than their married counterparts. It is harder for a single dad than a married one to follow a grinding corporate career that involves travel and long hours at the office.

Hartsock noted that statistically single men still do better financially than single moms.

Sean Cashion, 43, works in the mortgage lending business and shares custody of his three-year-old son, Luke. He says that money issues and work-and-childcare logistics are harder to balance than if he had a partner.

"Money would be easier if there were two incomes," said Cashion, who rents rather than owns a home. "And parental chores would be cut in half if there were two of us under one roof."

The oldest of nine children, Cashion had changed plenty of diapers and knew how to parent when Luke arrived.

Last week, Luke got an ear infection and Cashion didn't come into work until noon. Luke went to an aunt's house and then to his mom's and back to his dad.

"It all works out in the wash," laughed Cashion, who said he has a good working relationship with Luke's mother. "We get along and we are both very flexible. You have to be."

Another single dad, Julian Lipsher, has raised his daughter, Allison, alone for the last 16 years.

When Lipsher's wife Shore, a fiber artist, was eight months pregnant with Allison, she was diagnosed with a brain tumor and given less than a year to live. She died at 37.

"What could possibly prepare someone for this?" said Lipsher. "We were looking forward to being parents together. Life was supposed to be beginning."

When Allison was born, Lipsher was already getting information about hospice care.

"Life was going in two different directions at once," said Lipsher. "There was the care my wife needed and the care this new life needed."

Growing up an only child, Lipsher had no diaper-changing skills, let alone a child-rearing philosophy.

"Well, I never dropped her on her head, but every day was a learning experience," said Lipsher. "She was well-cared for, well-fed and I was very fortunate to have wonderful friends that I could rely on to ask questions and to ask some really dumb questions."

He said raising a small child is "like playing basketball one-on-one for years. They need to be watched every second. It's exhausting mentally and physically. But it makes you stronger and builds this incredible bond."

At parties, Lipsher would pass by the men drinking beer and watching the game to head for the kitchen. There he would ask the moms about what he should do with a problem or what to expect in the next phase of her development.

"Your child is right in front of you and has immediate needs that need to be taken care of and that sets your path," said Lipsher. "You don't have time to wallow about anything."

Lipsher said: "The hardest part of being a single dad is being single. You can make a decision easily because it's unilateral. But was it the right decision? You don't have someone there to have day-to-day conversations that help form opinions. Every stage of life is a different challenge that, ultimately, you must meet alone."

Allison, now almost 17, said one of the hardest things about growing up with a single father is that those decisions he was agonizing over were final.

"His way is the final say. It's not like you can go to another parent and negotiate anything," said Allison, who is about to enter her senior year at Punahou School and hopes to win a soccer scholarship for college.

"It was cool growing up with my dad. He really pushed me into sports and maybe I wouldn't have been as athletic," said Allison, "I'm sure puberty wasn't the most comfortable for him. But we can talk about that stuff pretty openly. It's cool."

Just before the junior class dance, Lipsher and Allison went shopping. They bought the dress and the shoes, but "the dress needed special undergarments," said Lipsher.

As they stood in the foreign territory of the lingerie department, Allison, recalled Lipsher, said, "Is this really weird for you?"

And her dad replied, "Only as weird as it has been for the last 16 years."

<http://www.census.gov/>

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