

# Ties still bind after the divorce for some families

By Olivia Barker, USA TODAY

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Oklahoma City's Guerrero clan knows how convenient it is to live about 1½ miles away from each other. A spare lawn mower, wet vac or grill is always only a short drive away. They trade babysitting duties.

But this is an extended family, with an emphasis on the "ex."

Even if the bloodlines have become kinked after divorce and remarriage, the Guerreros have far from severed ties, choosing to stay close — to stay related — in spite of a marital breakup.

These days, with divorce about as accepted as remarriage, being exes with your spouse doesn't mean you're exiled from him, or his family.

Consider those pervasive pictures of Bruce Willis popping up with ex Demi Moore and their brood —and Moore's current husband, Ashton Kutcher. Or the reports of Jennifer Aniston spending quality time with her former in-laws, the Pitts. Christie Brinkley attended the wedding of her most famous former husband, Billy Joel.

And most recently, Charlie Sheen's ex, Denise Richards, hung out with Brooke Mueller, his current fiancée. "I've spent time with her, and my girls really like her," Richards told *People* last month. (She and Sheen have two daughters.) "That's all that matters."

Liz and Albert Guerrero married in 1984 and, three boys later, broke up in 1991; four years after that, he and Karen got together, along with Karen's two sons, and then added a daughter of their own. After the breakup with Albert, Liz had a girl, too, but is now single.

Along the way, Karen became one of Liz's best friends.

"It's the strangest thing for most people, but it works for us," says Liz Guerrero, 41, who works in the office of a career tech school. "It is harder and more work to have ill feelings, fight and live with drama. So we just all get along."

Experts say the change is yet another, albeit at times thorny, branch on America's family tree as more seats are reserved at the holiday dinner table for surrogate mothers, sperm donors and birth parents of open adoptees — not to mention partners of parents who came out as gay post-marriage.

"It's part of our life now that all major celebrations that one attends tend to involve people who used to be married or intimate and no longer are," says Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, co-director of the National Marriage Project. "Very often now you'll see weddings with four parents — two exes and their new spouses," and

they're all engraved on the invitation.

What's significant, and somewhat troubling, Dafoe Whitehead says, is that after 30 years of no-fault divorce, Americans are putting the emphasis on smoothing out splits, as opposed to repairing them. "Divorce should be civilized for the sake of the children. I'm all for that," she says. "But at the same time, it's good for children, particularly, if we worked just as hard to make divorce less common. ... I just think there should be an equivalent effort."

### **'They didn't pick a side'**

Stan Charnofsky, an educational psychology and counseling professor at California State University-Northridge, remembers attending a nephew's piano recital 25 or 30 years ago. "There was my brother with his girlfriend and ex-girlfriend and his ex-wife," Charnofsky says. "A cousin in from the East Coast surveyed the scene and concluded, 'Only in California.'"

Now, of course, that picture is being played out across the USA. Like at Lora Leigh Luquet's Waveland, Miss., christening, where parents Lori and Marty Luquet were joined by Lora Leigh's godmother, Cheryl Mender — Marty's ex-wife. The comment from Marty's Aunt Rosie? "Nothing like keeping it in the family."

Mender, whose marriage to Luquet ended in 1992 after they had two kids, says she was surprised by the request but honored to take the role. She keeps a card that Lori Luquet, 45, wrote to her tucked in a box among her favorite things, including love letters from her current husband, Henry Mender.

"Lori said, 'Let's bring her in. Let's give her a stake in this,'" remembers Marty Luquet, 50, a high school teacher and coach. At family gatherings and school events, Lori didn't want Cheryl to have to refer to her children vs. "Marty's child."

So Lora Leigh, now 6, spends Tuesday afternoons with "Nanny," her godmother. Mender's mother is known as "Grandma Jackie."

"It's a safe relationship for everybody," says Mender, 47, a kindergarten teacher who lives in Destrehan, La., about a 10-minute drive from the Luquets in Norco. "Most kids, they can't talk about Mom when Dad's around" and vice versa. "Our kids never had that."

As far as Mender is concerned, she has two sets of in-laws, Henry Mender's parents and Marty Luquet's, whom she sees once a week or so.

"These are people you bonded with, that you've grown to know and perhaps love, so why should you give them up?" asks Sarasota, Fla., psychologist Peter Wish. "They're not asking to get rid of you."

Laurel Hageseth's relationship with her ex-husband is non-existent. But, 19 years after their divorce, his parents, Norma and Cotton Conrad, remain among the top five most important people in her life. They visit her in Fort Collins, Colo. She visits them in nearby Golden — and brings her current husband. They send her birthday cards and homemade Christmas jelly. She pulls their weeds and helps string up their Christmas lights. They display pictures of her at home. And they chat on the phone, long talks about Jason, her son and their grandson, and her husband — but never about the ugliness of the past.

"They just didn't pick a side; that was the most beautiful thing about them," says Hageseth, 50, who works in the continuing education office of a local university. "They just haven't let me go. They haven't said, 'Well, that's that.'"

Sometimes it's the husband and wife who don't want to completely let go. When Deb Cooperman and David Bausman split up in 1997 after seven years of marriage, they knew that, even though they needed to pursue different paths, they wanted "to hang onto the fact that we care about each other," says Cooperman, 46, a marketing and public relations director who lives in Millburn, N.J.

Since then, "the depth of our friendship and trust has deepened," she says, to the point that they talk on the phone a couple of times a week. Bausman is known to call Cooperman from the video store and inquire about a particular title, "Do you remember if I saw this?" Cooperman used Bausman as a sounding board when a long-term relationship was ending. (Neither has remarried.) She is actually Bausman's second ex: His first marriage produced a son, and the boy, now a college student, still calls Cooperman his stepmother. ("Just because Bill Clinton isn't the president anymore doesn't mean we stop calling him President Clinton," he told her soon after the divorce.) Cooperman, likewise, considers him her stepson.

"I call us a blended, extended, upended family," she says. "Good divorces aren't just for Bruce and Demi."

### **She's still 'Aunt Cathy'**

When Cathy and Michael Sleeter had Michael's siblings and their spouses over for dinner to break the news of their separation after 25 years of marriage, the Sleeter gang told Cathy, "You're still in the family. We'll always love you."

Two years after the divorce, the in-laws are still Cathy Sleeter's best friends. Her brothers-in-law helped her move into her Albuquerque townhouse and donated a couch, two chairs and bedroom set they weren't using anymore.

She attends their near-weekly Texas Hold 'Em games (sometimes Michael's there, too). She's still Aunt Cathy to their eight children, whom she cheers on at soccer and basketball games. And she's still included in their Christmas gift exchange.

"I just love that," says Sleeter, 54, who works in corporate training.

It's as if life's new collective chorus is: "We are family/I got all my ex-sisters-in-law with me."

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