



Welcome to our second CSM Newsletter. This newsletter highlights new events, new features of the website and new content in the forum. We hope you enjoy it!

#### In This Edition

- CSM Fundraisers
- CSM's who made it!
- What's New on the Forum
- CSM in History: Frida Kahlo
- And more!

**Second Annual  
CSM Conference  
May 5th-7th  
Don't miss it!**

## 2006 CSM Conference Scholarship Fundraiser

*Not flesh of my flesh  
Nor bone of my bone  
But still miraculously  
My own.  
Never forget  
For a single minute  
You didn't grow under  
My heart  
But in it.*  
-- Becca Gibb

Penswicola writes: The Childless StepMoms, NFP logo represents wealth to me. It is a wealth of life, home and family. It is a wealth of support, understanding and endless friendship. It can never be measured in money, but instead by the hearts and souls that have been nurtured to take back their lives and move forward. The mother and child image reminds me that I am a childless stepmom for a reason.



I'm here to make a difference in my stepchild's life. Good or bad, I will make an impression. And I'm proud to wear this image around my neck because it represents a part of who I am. In addition I'm proud to say that the proceeds from the sales of this necklace will go in their entirety towards the 2006 CSM Conference Scholarship Fund. This will go towards bringing more CSMs together at the 2006 Conference that probably would not be able to attend for financial reasons. Let's make it our goal to gather together as many CSMs as possible in 2006. So please visit the store and place your order today.

### CSM in History

## From Surviving to Thriving: The Life of Frida Kahlo by Puma\_bird

(July 6, 1907-July 13, 1954) Artist Frida Kahlo once described her life as shaped by two "accidents" - a streetcar wreck in 1925, and her marriage to fellow Mexican artist Diego Rivera. Each

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**When the Step-  
children Are Grown:  
Q & A  
by trekantelope**

The day-to-day demands of work, family life, and friends don't leave a stepmother with a lot of free time for thinking about the future. And yet, hopefully her efforts as a stepparent are leading both her and her stepchildren to the same place: a future in which the stepkids are capable adults  
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### What's New in the Forum

- Recipe Forum** - Crunchy Poppyseed Chicken Salad
- Current Book Discussion** - The Single Girls Guide...
- How to** - The Gallery

## What's new on the CSM Forum?

### Recipe forum

*In the recipe forum you will find delicious recipes by fellow CSMs some kid-friendly, some for special dinners with your SO or a group of friends. For example Justme suggests you try:*



#### **Crunchy Poppyseed Chicken Salad**

- 4 cups broccoli slaw
- 2 large red peppers, thinly sliced
- 2 cups shredded carrots
- 1 (8 oz.) can pineapple tidbits, drained
- 6 oz. Cooked chicken breast, cubed
- Creamy Poppyseed dressing to taste
- Cashews to taste

Combine all ingredients except cashews. Sprinkle cashews on top. Makes 4 servings. This main-dish salad is best made a day ahead. I substituted almonds for the cashews, which I found to be even better. The peppers and nuts give it a wonderfully crunchy texture. The best part: no onions for those picky eaters and lots of vitamin C.

### How to: The Gallery

*The Gallery is a fun feature of our forum and Denise helps us to make the most of it.*

Have you checked out the Gallery at CSM yet? It's filled with photos of CSMs and the things they love. To get there, just click on the word Gallery right under the CSM logo at the top of the screen. Then click on Members Gallery. Everyone's album will be listed and you can double click on name of the album you want to view. You can click each photo in an album individually or you

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### Current Book Discussion

*Join solsurfista in the latest CSM related book discussion: *The Single Girl's Guide to Marrying a Man, His Kids, and His Ex-Wife: : Becoming A Stepmother With Humor And Grace**



Sally Bjornsen writes a “laugh out loud” memoir of her experience as a childless stepmom. I also love the book cover. It pictures the bride and groom with the kids and ex-wife following behind! This book is the “Sex and the City” for all stepmoms.

Each chapter deals specifically with dealing with the kids, the wonderful ex-wife, discipline, money, vacations, and holidays. Also discussed is the “stepmother identity crisis” and “taming your evil twin”. What really stood out was the humor involved and each section ending with “The Sassy Stepmother Straight Scoop.”

The author writes a funny account of purposely being tripped by one of her stepson's while out shopping. She wrote “Mark stood frozen as he took in the sight: me on all fours, cursing like a drunk and picking rocks out of my bloody palms, Guy sobbing I laughed after she wrote “Our Trip-gate disaster of 1999 taught me the ‘kids come first’ lesson.” Another funny account is the “No Stepmothers Allowed Club”. Bjornsen equates the “Mommy Club” to a sorority. You are not allowed in until you give birth or adopt! Types of ex-wives you will encounter are well discussed and good advice is given on how to deal with those prototypes, especially dealing with a difficult biological mother (BM). Currently, a discussion group is being held on the CSM forum, under BookClub. Feel free to join and share your stories! I will be adding new chapters each week.

## Grown Stepchildren Q and A cont.

who are out of the nest and finding their way in the world.

Recently we asked several CSM members who have adult stepkids to share their experiences and advice. Four women gave generously of their time in answering our questions. They are Christina, age 49; Mrsam, age 36; Puma\_bird, age 35, and Bonus mom, age 44.

Christina first became a stepmother at age 24, then again at age 43. She and her husband, who she's been married to for six years, live in the northern suburbs of Chicago. She has six stepchildren—five stepdaughters between the ages of 14 and 28, and one stepson, age 30. Only SD 15 and SD16 are still living at home.

Mrsam has been a stepmother for three-and-a-half years. She has one stepdaughter. SD 28 works in the loan-processing industry and owns a condo, where both she and her biological mother live.

Puma\_bird became a CSM at the age of 22. She and her husband live in Olympia, Washington. They've been together for 13 years; she has one 18-year-old stepdaughter who recently moved to Seattle to attend aesthetician (beauty) school.

Bonus mom has been married for 15 years. She and her husband live in San Diego, California. Her stepdaughter, who is 23 and lives in northern California with her fiancé, graduated from college last year and now works as a secretary for a school district.

*What were your expectations when you first became a stepmother? Were they accurate?*

**Bonus mom:** Since I had grown up with stepparents, I expected to be treated as I treated my own stepparents. They were involved but not overly so. My own parents commanded respect for my stepparents, but didn't dictate that I had to like or love them. When I became a stepparent I expected to be treated the same. I did expect it to be hard, because I was a realist when I got into

the situation. I knew that my SD's mother would be a part of our lives. I also knew I had to set up boundaries on what I would do and would not do for my SD. I expected my husband to take me into consideration when making decisions that affected our lives with regard to my SD.

For the most part my expectations were accurate. The only surprise was how hard all it actually was and how much energy it took. . . . It took a while for me to help my husband see that our family was him, me, and SD in the center, and BM was a moon orbiting our world. . . . Once this view on our family was established, life became a little easier.

**Puma\_bird:** I expected having a stepdaughter would give me insight into what it would be like to have kids of my own, and I expected to have an affectionate relationship with SD. . . . I think we women often expect that of course we're good with kids, and of course they're going to like us. We're not expecting our affection to be pushed away. I didn't realize that my SD would at times be reacting to me because of my role, not because of who I was or how I treated her. Also, when I met DH, I didn't want kids of my own, and that changed after we were married, which I didn't expect. I believe the change was because of seeing my DH parent, seeing what a good dad he was to SD, and seeing how well we coparented together.

**Christina:** With the first set of kids my expectation was to be a sort of aunt figure—parental but fun and someone they could confide in. With the second I didn't know what to expect. It was the same at first but after the PAS started I hoped to one day become someone they didn't hate. My expectations were accurate for the first set of girls but my SS never really let me in completely except during a couple of years that he was at odds with BM.

With the second set, my SD21 and I still have not come to terms but are beginning to work on it. I love them all but am the most parental with the youngest two because we have custody. I've had to take on more of a parental role with them because their mother has done so little of that.

## **Grown Stepchildren Q and A cont.**

**Mrsam:** I never thought of myself as a stepmom, simply because my stepdaughter was an adult when I met my DH. However, I at least wanted mutual respect. I got it at first but when the BM moved in with her that went out the window. . . . I tried venting to my DH but he seemed to be defensive of her behavior no matter how bad or unprovoked it was to me. It really wasn't until I found the CSM site and bulletin board that I really realized how universal my experiences were among CSMs. That was a relief.

*What influence did you, individually, have on the development of your skid(s) into adults?*

**Mrsam:** None (see above).

**Christina:** I had a tremendous amount of influence, but you don't see it until much later on when they are grown. Then you start hearing them say things that are things you said to them, hear philosophies they got only from you. You see them put into practice things you taught them. They call for advice and pick up your mannerisms.

**Bonus mom:** I think I had a great deal of influence on my SD. But the main one was her going to college. I don't think she would have gone if I hadn't been going to school while she was little. Neither of her parents went to college, so I was the only one who could truly tell her about the experience and the importance of going. I also think I helped develop her confidence. She stands up for herself and isn't afraid of authority in a positive way. I think I influenced her love of reading (we went to the library a lot), and travel.

**Puma\_bird:** I always tried to look for ways to connect with SD. When she was younger, I would read some of the books she read and watch the TV shows she mentioned, so we had something to talk about. The teen years were harder, but I still tried to connect with her, even if it was by asking her to explain to me who some famous pop star was. I have always expressed to her that I care for her, both directly and indirectly. I think I was

able to positively influence DH in his parenting of her—make suggestions at times and give him feedback on his ideas, and I believe I helped make their connection stronger.

*What were some of the happiest or most memorable moments with your skids?*

**Christina:** The “family” times when we did things together, on vacation, at home—any time that we were all relaxed and having fun.

**Bonus mom:** The best times with my SD were the times at night when I would make herbal tea for the two of us and we would talk. She would tell me what was worrying her and I would try to help. This helped us forge a close bond.

**Mrsam:** Before BM came on the scene, SD, DH and I, and any boyfriend of SD's she had usually enjoyed sit-down meals (a rarity for her and a welcome treat) and we'd rent movies. We'd laugh and joke a lot.

**Puma\_bird:** Hmm, I'm getting tears in my eyes thinking of it. When she was about 7 and we had all recently moved in together, she and I used to dress up in my jewelry and fancy clothes and give fashion shows to DH. I remember one time we were each pretending to be the Statue of Liberty, using a feather duster in place of the torch. More recently, I felt very proud of SD when we talked with her about protecting herself sexually. She was able to listen to our concerns without being embarrassed, and to take the condoms we had bought her without any judgment.

*Is there anything you wish you'd done differently?*

**Mrsam:** No, because my stepdaughter was an adult when I met my DH.

**Puma\_bird:** I spent many years actively hating SD's BM, and thinking it wasn't affecting anyone other than myself, so I felt very badly when I realized SD was aware of it and it bothered her. I wish I'd made my peace with BM sooner. I wish I'd had more courage at times in my relationship with DH, because I know I let fear keep me from speaking up when I thought he might choose

## **Grown Stepchildren Q and A cont.**

SD over me. The reality is, I could have still expressed what I needed, rather than keeping it inside.

**Bonus mom:** I would have had my own child while SD was still little. This would have given her a sibling and tied us more together as a family. I would have also been more supportive in her sports life. She liked to swim, but because her mother lived at a different end of town, it was inconvenient for us to go to practices and sell the candy, etc. I would have also taught her better about being closer to family. I wasn't close to my own family and neither was my husband, so I think through our actions (or lack of action) I taught her family wasn't that important, when in reality it really is. Lastly, I would not have badmouthed her mother in front of her. I didn't do it often, but I did do it.

**Christina:** I wish I could have relaxed more—worried less about how they felt about me and more about how I felt about me.

*What is your relationship with your skids now that they are grown?*

**Mrsam:** Fractured. I look at my situation from a legal standpoint: I don't owe her anything. If she chose to break off any relationship/friendship with me that's her doing and choice. I have my own family to love me and my DH and I are very happy. Should she choose to have any relationship with me in the future the door is always open.

**Christina:** It's great. My SS and I are cordial but not especially close, but the older girls and I are very good friends, they adore my new DH and treat the younger SDs very well.

**Bonus mom:** We're not close. We were closer when she was little and lived in town. Now that she is an adult, her lifestyle is the complete opposite of mine. I love her and feel attached to her and she feels that way about me, but long stretches of time go by before we communicate.

**Puma\_bird:** We are affectionate but not super close. When we are around each other, we are comfortable, and we enjoy each other's company. I think my challenge now [that SD has moved to Seattle] will be to stay connected in a way that feels meaningful and supportive, since (I am assuming) we will not see her as regularly. I still want her to know I support her in her endeavors and I love her, and I also don't want to be invasive of her new life in the Big City, or encroach on her relationship with her BM.

*As you look back over your experiences as a stepmother, how did it affect or even change who you have become now?*

**Mrsam:** It really taught me to be self-assured. Confident. To know when to speak up and when to keep quiet. To know boundaries. I'm not her BM. I don't have to parent her in any way.

**Bonus mom:** I don't know if I have really changed. I think I have always been a little selfish, so being a stepmom helped me see that it's better to give than receive and that I can make a difference in someone's life by giving more of myself. However this is difficult for me. I am still selfish about my wants and needs. As time goes on it makes me more aware of the importance of family.

**Puma\_bird:** It was a huge influence on me. I don't know that I would have gone to therapy if it weren't for being a CSM—not that I didn't need therapy, but I think being a CSM helped me get there faster than I otherwise would, and helped me have a healthier life than I would have otherwise. I know being a CSM affected my feelings about wanting to have my own kids. I had decided when I was 12 that I didn't want any, but it was a decision made from a pretty damaged place. Even though DH and I won't have biokids together, it still feels healthier to me to have gotten to where I can acknowledge I would have liked to. I feel like I am more compassionate with children and teens than I would have been otherwise, and that it has made me a more generous person. After all, not everyone is willing to contribute to the development of a child who is not biologically "theirs," and I have realized

## **Grown Stepchildren Q and A cont.**

through this experience that I can love a child who did not come out of my body.

**Christina:** I've been a stepmom for over 25 years. It's so much a part of who I am that I don't know. I'm sure that it did change me in many ways. I guess that most significantly it has taught me the power of love. It can overcome a lot.

*What advice would you give women who are about to become CSMs? What are the most important things a woman needs in order to be a successful stepmom?*

**Bonus mom:** I would advise a potential stepmother to carefully think about what they are taking on and want they really want their married life to be. They need to be strong, kind, willing to share, and most of all not have expectations that everything will work out the way they want it to, because there are more people involved who get a say in your married life. They also have to be willing to relinquish some control and know how to set boundaries. I also recommend that if a woman wants children and plans on becoming a mother, to do so pretty quickly after the marriage. You're still in adjustment mode, so it's easier for all members of the new family.

Remember that sometimes the relationship with skids will be one-sided. You will give everything and may get nothing in return, and you have to be OK with that. Remain respectful of the skids and the father relationship; don't make him choose between you and the kids. The surprise is you get back much more than you bargained for. I think I was successful because I had great role models in my own stepparents. They were there for me, but didn't try to become my parents right away. We forged our own relationship, which is still close after all these years.

My last piece of advice is to find a support group or online support group like CSM. I wish I had this Web site when I first started. It would have helped with the many fears, anger, and joys that I had. Husbands, friends, and other family members really don't understand what being a

CSM is like. Women who have given birth to their own children see life differently than childless stepmoms and so do husbands. A support group of kindred spirits makes one feel less alone.

**Puma\_bird:** 1) Go into therapy when you need it, either in a couples/family setting or by yourself. It doesn't mean you're crazy, it just means you're in a complicated situation and you may need help in making it work. 2) Read as much as you can about being a CSM and make sure being a CSM is worth it for you. 3) Definitely join Childlessstepmoms.org for friendship and great support. 4) Speak up to your SO/DH when you need something; your needs are just as important as everyone else's in the family. 5) Make your peace with the BM early—you will feel better and your skids will, too. 6) Expect your DH to be supportive of you and to be the primary parent with the skids. If he cannot be supportive of you as his life partner, or if he expects you will take over his job of parenting his children, your job as a CSM will be much more difficult.

**Mrsam:** Know what you are getting into. You will never be in first place, your DH will always have a lifelong obligation to be a dad to his kids. If that doesn't sound like it's for you, don't get involved. It's very rarely a warm and fuzzy situation. Jealousy is such a large part of it. The child, grown up or not, will always feel deep down you're a reminder of the pain that her mom and dad didn't make it together. Childlessstepmoms.org is also a great resource—it really helped me to “get a grip,” so to speak!

**Christina:** Maintain your own life separate and outside of “the family.” If who you are becomes the whim of who your partner and stepchildren think you are, you are going to be bobbing along in a sea of reaction. If you stay strongly rooted in who you are by maintaining your friends and interests you will be able to be more grounded and stable through the stresses. This isn't easy for those of us who think we have to be perfect. We want to rush in and be the best wife, stepmother, etc. Be the best you, instead. The most important things you need are: love, patience, self-esteem, great friends, a sense of humor, and 1,000 CSMs.

### The Gallery cont.

can click on Slideshow and the photos will change automatically. The default number of seconds between photos is 5 but you can change that to whatever you want.

Want to create a collection? Here are the step-by-step instructions:

1. Click on **My Controls** (right side of the screen across from your login name). Your Control Panel will open.
2. Look for Invision Gallery on the left side of the screen.
3. Click on **Your Albums**. The Album Manager will open.
4. Click on **Create Album**. The text boxes for naming and describing your album will open.
5. Name the Album and add a description of it (e.g., “*Denise’s Album*” could be the name and “*A few of my favorite photos*” could be the description)
6. Check the box marked **Public** if you want everyone to be able to see your album. If you don’t check this box, your album will be **Private** and only you will be able to view it.
7. Click **Upload Image**
8. Type a caption for your photo. This is what will appear over the photo when it is displayed in the Gallery.
9. Type an info you want in the text box in the middle of the screen. This could be a description of who is in the photo or what the occasion was.
10. Finally, you’re ready to add a photo. The easiest way is to have the photo on your hard drive. Click **Browse**, find the photo on your computer and double click on it. It has to be in the gif or jpg format.
11. Click Post Image. You’ll see a **Thanks** message and you’ll be transferred to the Album Manager.
12. From the Album Manager, you have to repeat the steps to Upload Image for each photo.

Want to add or delete a photo or edit the caption or description in a collection you already started?

1. Go to My Controls
2. Look for Invision Gallery on the left side of the screen.
3. Click on **Your Albums**
4. Click on the **Edit** button next to the album you want to add to or delete from

Enjoy viewing and posting pictures!

### Frida Kahlo cont.

event brought significant pain to her life, and was a contributing factor in making her a childless stepmom. Yet Frida not only survived these “accidents,” she thrived - turning her pain into artistic passion, gaining fame during her lifetime as a painter and muralist, and becoming recognized after death as a brilliant national treasure and one of Mexico’s greatest 20th Century artists.

The first accident, a horrific streetcar crash when she was 18, left Frida with a broken spine, pelvis, collarbone, ribs, right leg and foot. Antibiotics were unknown in those days, and she was initially given no chance of survival. Because of her injuries, Frida would be unable to carry a pregnancy to full-term, and would eventually need more than 30 surgeries, including the amputation of her leg. Fortunately, her arms and hands were uninjured. She had dabbled in art before, drawing anatomy sketches in her pre-med classes. Now, during her initial recovery, the bored and uncomfortable Frida began painting in earnest, channeling her frustration, loneliness, pain and grief into art.

Frida met with the other “accident,” Diego Rivera, when she was just 15, and he was already a well-known married artist and ladies’ man. (Diego fathered at least two children with European women, but apparently those children never returned to Mexico or lived with him.) Frida sought Diego out after recovering from the streetcar accident, and asked him to critique her work. They eventually married twice (they divorced briefly in 1939) and remained together until Frida’s death. By all accounts, they loved each other deeply. However, Diego had no plans to be faithful, and cheated on Frida repeatedly, including with Frida’s sister. Diego’s ex-wife and mother of two of his daughters, Lupe Marin, remained nearby. Frida lost three pregnancies due to her health. Diego, Lupe, the lost babies, and the unfaithfulness all found their way into Frida’s paintings.

## **Frida Kahlo cont.**

Frida never stopped longing to have Diego all to herself, but she eventually accepted his behavior and also sought her own fulfillment outside their marriage. “Diego is not anybody’s husband and never will be,” she commented, “but he is a great comrade.” She befriended Diego’s ex-wife. Lupe helped Frida learn to cook Diego’s favorite meals, and Frida painted Lupe’s portrait. Frida spoiled her niece, nephew, stepdaughters and friends’ children, and filled her home with dolls and pets.

While Frida’s injuries inspired her to create powerful and well-recognized images of physical pain (such as *The Broken Column*, showing Frida’s body barely held together by a steel corset), some people believe Frida’s best work came from the sadness over not having her own babies. *Henry Ford Hospital*, *Frida and the Caesarean Operation*, and *Frida and the Miscarriage* are all self-portraits containing bloody, visceral images of her pregnancy attempts. In *My Birth*, Frida simultaneously portrayed herself as both a drooping half-born baby and a mother dying in delivery. *Me and My Doll* shows Frida sitting with an empty expression next to the child’s toy. Is it possible that Frida’s experience as a childless stepmom also fueled her artistic fire? *The Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth (Mexico), Diego, Me, and Senor Xolotl* shows not only Frida’s longing for Diego, but the rifts in their relationship, and her belief that his commitment never matched hers.

In her short lifetime, Frida painted more than 150 paintings. Her work also included images of traditional Mexican daily life, clothing, food and jewelry, and Frida was well known in her time as a champion of the poor. Though married to a famous artist, she never competed with, nor let herself be eclipsed by, Diego Rivera. Several books, television shows and movies have been produced about Frida’s life and work. Perhaps one of the sweetest of these tributes is the food-accented memoir published by Frida’s stepdaughter in 1994. *Frida’s Fiestas: Recipes and Reminiscences of Life with*

Frida Kahlo contains family photos from a year when Guadalupe Rivera Marin lived with her father and stepmother. This book also arranges recipes around descriptions of 12 traditional Mexican holidays.

Frida’s two “accidents” shaped the course of her life, and perhaps led her down a path she might not otherwise have taken. Yet not content with just surviving, Frida thrived. She turned monstrous misfortunes into arresting images, and channeled the life experiences of one childless stepmom into work that remains powerful, lasting and timeless.

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## **We’d like to hear from YOU!**

We are always looking for articles, essays, poems, and short stories for the newsletter and web site. If you have something you would like to share with the CSM community, contact us.