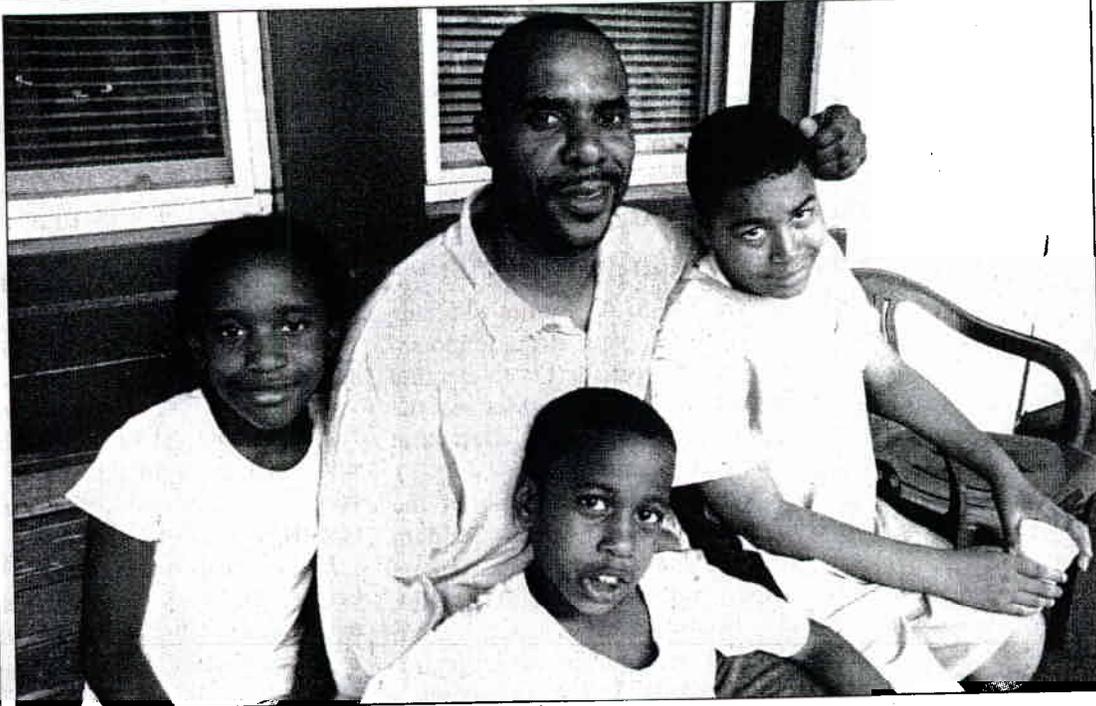


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Stanley C. Stevens, 44, joins his children, Hasaan Williams, 13, far right, Octavia Stevens, 9, left and Stanley Stevens Jr., 7, center, in front of their Olney home. - PHOTO BY MARISSA J. WEEKES/TRIBUNE STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

# Father 'steps up to the plate'

BY NIA NGINA MEEKS  
Tribune Staff Writer

2:00 AM

Stanley C. Stevens Sr. doesn't mind sweltering in his small kitchen, simultaneously spicing his tomato sauce and boiling spaghetti.

He does this much and more daily for the love of his life.

Make that loves - Stanley Jr., Octavia Nicole and, more recently, 13-year-old Hasaan.

Stevens is among the nation's 2 million single fathers raising children.

His Father's Day is doubly special, though, because he not only cares for his children, but also for those of others.

For the past four years, Stevens has served as a foster father for kids like Hasaan, who came his way nearly two weeks ago. The Philadelphia Department of Human Services reports that Stevens is an anomaly, but in his mind, he's just doing what needs to be done.

"We're crying for Black men to step up to the plate," says Stevens, 44. "We're not carrying the

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load like we're supposed to. But if we could all start stepping up, things could change."

A knock at the door sends him scooting outside. Stanley Jr., 7, had gotten into a scrap, the rough-and-tumble play that sometimes gets even rougher. His sobs muffle his words.

"Go upstairs and wash your face," Stevens says, heading back to the kitchen. "Then come back and talk to me."

He shrugs his shoulders. Childhood is not much different than when Stevens grew up near Broad and Belfield.

"It's part of being a young man," he says, stirring his sauce. "Either you avoid it or you go tell somebody. If you take matters in your own hands, well, you have to be ready for the consequences."

Stanley Jr. returns, a little calmer. His dad dispatches him to the living room, where Teen Titans do battle on television.

His kids were but babies when he and their mother split. With three kids from another relationship, she felt overwhelmed. If he could handle it, she said, he could take the two latest additions with him.

He thought he was up to the challenge.

As one of 11 children himself,

Stevens was no stranger to diapers. But thoughts of SIDS sent him into cold sweats several nights, and cowering proved another struggle.

"I remember being in WIC [Women, Infants and Children] and being the only one, the only man who went through there," he recalls. "People would look at me, like, 'What's he doing with those kids?'"

"When I had double strollers, people really looked and stared," he said.

Hasaan drifts in and out of the kitchen but doesn't break into a smile until he eats.

"He's a good young man, though," Stevens says, looking at Hasaan and smiling. "A good young man."

Over the years, Stevens has had nine youngsters in his home, all boys.

His sister nudged him to be a foster parent like her when he bought his home in Olney six years ago. He decided to go for it.

One young man stayed with him for a year and a half. Now he's a high school graduate and on his way to Temple University.

Another got married recently. Three went back to their parents. Others are still in the system. But they all call or come by to hang and catch up. He calls them all his kids.

"It is a stereotype that single



**Stanley C. Stevens, 44, of Olney, joins his children, Hasaan Williams, 13, far right, Octavia Stevens, 9, center, and Stanley Stevens Jr., 7, for dinner. Stevens is a single father who plans to eat pancakes with his children during a Father's Day breakfast.**

—PHOTO BY MARISSA J. WEEKS/TRIBUNE STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

men, single fathers, don't take care of their children, especially Black single fathers," says Earl Ofari Hutchinson, a Los

Angeles-based columnist and author of "Black Fatherhood: The Guide To Male Parenting" (Middle Passage 1994).

"More men over the last decade have finally gotten the message. I'm not saying all, most, or many, but a significant number have said, 'I want to be involved with my children.' We have a whole range of men who do a lot of different things to a lot of different degrees."

Stevens says, "Just because I'm not a biological father doesn't mean I can't put a foot forward for [a] young man."

He put his Gratz High School diploma to work first in office furniture repair and delivery, then a 14-year cooking career before he burned out like crumbs in a toaster.

As of late, he serves as a heating specialist for Penrose Properties. Cooking is still in the picture, though.

The kids' report his oatmeal, French toast and fried chicken are tops. Everything else earns scrutiny.

"You put leaves in here!" 9-year-old Octavia exclaimed, plucking a bay leaf from her plate.

"That's seasoning," Stevens says, after chuckling a little bit.

Her frown eases as she chomps some more.

A woman in this scene hardly would raise an eyebrow anymore. Since 1970, the number of single mothers rose 300 percent to some 10 million strong.

During that same period,

though, the number of single fathers jumped 500 percent, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Drugs, divorce, incarceration and other factors have opened the gates for this newest realm of fatherhood. Lessons from the women's rights movement and the Million Man March have convinced growing numbers to own up to their responsibilities, Hutchinson says.

Of course, the demands on Stevens are no different than the average LaTanya or Jean hustling to raise a child alone, and he says as much.

Meshing work schedules with the kids' after-school care, camps and doctor's visits. Fixing dinner, washing clothes and checking homework at night. And squeezing in parent-teacher conferences, home-and-school association meetings and the kids' games - Octavia alone has seven trophies for T-ball and cheerleading - takes some doing.

The early morning-why-did-you-wake-me-up attitude is especially grating, he says, but moments like this and days like today are the rewards.

They've pooled their \$5 allotments together for a Dad's Day treat - dinner at Ms. Tootsie's. He can't wait.

"I didn't know what would come with it, at first," Stevens says, "But I love my kids."