

**MODERN FAMILY** While some former spouses never get over the bitterness of a breakup, a fortunate few develop deep and meaningful friendships. Meet three couples who've bridged that divide / BY ANNE BOKMA



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**Laura Hatcher and Bob**

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*Hamilton, Ont.*

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Laura and Bob spend their time doing most of the things married couples with kids do: sit together in the stands during their son's hockey games; tackle household repairs; lean on each other for support; and make a point of connecting regularly. What's unusual? They're no longer married. What's more, they've never gotten along better. "We lost our friendship for a while after we split up, but thankfully we got it back," says Laura. "The best part is our kids tell us all the time how great we are as divorced parents."

Indeed, it was her determination to "do as little damage" to her kids as possible that motivated Laura to maintain a friendly relationship with Bob after they divorced. Still a regular fixture in her life 12 years after their separation, Bob spends Christmas morning with Laura and their three kids and has been by her side over the years during the kids' sports and school events.

When their eldest went to university, they drove her there together. “I talk to Bob almost every day and see him once or twice a week. He’s a great listener and knows my history,” says Laura, 51, who met Bob when she was 19.

**> HOW SHE MAKES IT WORK** It wasn’t always easy. After all, Bob had initiated the breakup. “He wasn’t in love with me anymore and I wasn’t sure if I was in love with him,” recalls Laura. “We rarely fought and everyone thought we had a great marriage, but we’d drifted apart.” The first year after they separated she was hurt and angry, but says counselling helped her heal. “It would have been easy to blame him for being the one who left, and make him look like the bad guy, but I had to face up to some of my own flaws,” she admits. Their kids kept them connected, and their group of friends continued to include both of them at social gatherings. Pretty soon their connection morphed into an easy friendship, even when both of them started dating, and now Bob is in a relationship. “It can be hard initially when one person gets involved with someone and the other person doesn’t have anybody,” acknowledges Laura. But, she adds, she’s also developed a friendly relationship with her ex’s girlfriend. “She’s a wonderful person. I’m happy for him, and the kids like her.”

### EVELYN SMITH\* AND RICHARD\*

Laval, Que.

When her partner broke it off after living together for eight years, it took Evelyn more than a year before she was able to be friends. “I needed to have some distance for a while,” she explains, “but then I realized how much I missed having her in my life.”

**> HOW SHE MAKES IT WORK** “I realized I still loved this person, even if it wasn’t in a romantic way anymore, and I wanted to have a connection with her,” Evelyn, 56, admits. “Breaking up may not have been what I wanted, but I realized I could still be open to her as a person. Besides, the lesbian community here is relatively small and we have lots of mutual friends, so it made sense to stay close.”

It probably helped that Evelyn had some experience in maintaining close



**M**  
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ties with an ex. In her twenties, she was briefly married to Richard, with whom she has a son. “Shortly after separating, I came out,” recalls Evelyn, who was determined to make things work for the sake of their son. She gave her former husband a key to her house so he could come by and hang out with their son any time he wanted. They shared birthdays as a family and continued playing tennis together.

Eventually Richard found a new partner — a friend of Evelyn’s. More than 20 years after their separation, they still get together on special occasions with their now 25-year-old son. “You need to be emotionally mature to negotiate these relationships, and certainly with kids you have to make sure you think of your child first,” says Evelyn. “It’s not about you anymore.”

As a psychologist, Evelyn says she’s seen first-hand the damage that can occur when couples can’t move past their anger and resentment. “There are people who have been divorced a long time but are still emotionally tied at the hip because they can’t move on. It just creates more misery for them.”

### PATRICIA RITTER\* AND DAVID\*

Halifax

Sometimes it can be easier to hang on to what feels familiar. That’s the case for Patricia, a retired bookkeeper who considers her ex-husband, David, her closest friend. They were married for 20 years, split more than 10 years ago and came back into each other’s lives about six years ago. They have no children, but a love of travel has kept them connected. Patricia and her ex have visited China, Ireland and Spain together and even share a hotel room on vacation. “There’s no sex,” Patricia insists.

**> HOW SHE MAKES IT WORK** Neither is currently dating and Patricia admits if David were to have a new woman in his life, “it would probably wreck our friendship.”

“We’re more like brother and sister,” explains Patricia, 64. She and her ex live in the same neighbourhood, have dinner together regularly and talk most days. “We’re good companions for each other — I know if anything happened to me, he’d be here in a nanosecond.” **M**

\*Names changed by request