

“Looking for Marriage in Middle America”

— AMBER AND DAVID LAPP



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Amber and David Lapp, researchers at the Institute for American Values, are co-investigators of the Love and Marriage in Middle America project, an inquiry into how working and middle class young adults in one Ohio town form families and view marriage. They blog at FamilyScholars.org.

Propositions

APRIL 2013

Stephanie's Story

WE WERE IN A LONG LINE WINDING THROUGH THE HALLWAYS of Grace Baptist, past the Sunday School drawings of Crayola rainbows and animals two-by-two, past the Midwestern pastor whose cheerful eyes are smiling slits behind half-rimmed glasses—an ever-friendly face whether preaching a sermon or delivering Papa John's pizza to supplement his modest salary—until at last we arrived at long tables of turkey and mashed potatoes, corn bread and homemade stuffing.

Stephanie, a twenty-five-year-old mother of two who lives with her boyfriend, came for the free food. Her short blonde hair was spiked like Pink's; her light-colored jeans sported holes from knees to thighs with the feet of a fallen angel tattoo peeking through the white threads. Her sixteen-month-old Aubrey wrapped her chubby thighs around Stephanie's waist as six-year-old Colton eyed the dessert table and tugged at his mother's sweatshirt, its logo from the local community college where Stephanie studied social work for two semesters before moving on to cosmetology school elsewhere.

After loading our plates, we found ourselves sitting across the table from Stephanie and the children, as Aubrey threw mashed potato globs into her stroller and Colton fired rapid questions and demanded to go to the bathroom.

"Let me just finish feeding Aubrey," Stephanie said.

David offered to take Colton to the bathroom, a gesture Stephanie appreciated.

"Yes, please," she said. "My boyfriend wasn't feeling good tonight so he stayed home," she added, sounding frustrated.

While David and Colton were gone, Stephanie elaborated about her boyfriend.

"Eh, things are alright. We broke up a couple weeks ago, but he just moved back in. I love him to death, but sometimes he gets on my nerves. He doesn't have a job right now. My car just got repoed on Monday, so I had to quit my job at Subway. So the kids and I walked here."

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They had walked a mile for their meal on a winter night in Ohio—Aubrey in jammies and a pink snowsuit, tucked under blankets in her stroller, Colton waddling in his oversized winter coat, pausing to point out the sights, gazing from a bridge at the icy creek water until his mom scolded him to keep up.

Stephanie and her working class neighbors have been much in the news recently: from Charles Murray’s book documenting their declining middle class status, to a MTV reality show, *Buckwild*, cashing in on the drama of their young lives. And there is a lot of drama. Among Stephanie’s “Middle American” demographic—the almost sixty percent of young adults with a high school education but no college degree—marriage is unraveling as they cycle through unstable relationships marked by hooking up, moving in together, having babies, breaking up, hooking up with someone else, moving in together, and so on. Forty-four percent of births to high school educated mothers are outside of marriage. Forty-three percent of high school educated adults say that marriage has not worked out for most people they know.

As part of an ethnographic inquiry into the lives of working and middle class young adults in one small Ohio town, we have spent the past two-and-a-half years talking with over a hundred young adults, ages nineteen to thirty-five, about their views on love, children, and marriage, seeking to understand the stories behind these statistics.

Are Middle Americans Rejecting Marriage?

SO WHAT IS GOING ON IN MIDDLE AMERICA? ARE YOUNG MIDDLE Americans like Stephanie just voting with their feet and voluntarily opting out of marriage?

Stephanie does not see it that way. She wants to get married. “But I don’t know how to get there,” she says. Her parents divorced when she was in first grade. Of the few married people Stephanie knows, virtually none of them seem happy. When it comes to marriage, she has no models or scripts besides what she sees in chick flicks and reality television.

Yet, Stephanie still associates marriage with a higher level of trust—and trust is what she longs for after relationships with alcoholics, drug-users, and abusive and unfaithful men. Even Seth, the man she loves most of all, cheated on her twice while her feet were swelling and her back was bending under the weight of their unborn daughter. “I feel like I won’t be able to trust him until we are married,” she says. “Because then we’ll be legally bound.”

Stephanie has been engaged twice, and she has turned down even more proposals. Each time she found herself confronting uncertainty. It just didn't feel right, she says. Then, she was not ready to "settle down." But now that Stephanie has kids and can imagine herself with Seth forever, marriage is on her mind.

When the Time Warner workers came to install their internet, Stephanie says she "was getting all excited" because they were calling her "Mrs. Weiler." Another day, while Stephanie was watching a Lifetime movie and Seth was playing the video game *Tribes*, a commercial for \$20 synthetic diamond rings came on. "I want one of those!" she yelled at Seth, who had his headset on. Later that week when they were shopping at Walmart, she pointed out a cheap engagement and wedding band set and told Seth that she would be fine with that. And while browsing in Half-Priced Books, Stephanie drifted to the do-it-yourself section and started looking at the wedding books. On a double date over burgers and bottomless fries at Red Robin, she hinted, "I was thinking I could make my own bridesmaid dresses."

"Who would your bridesmaids even be?" Seth asked.

It is not that Seth, twenty-three, does not want to get married. He does. Lately he has been calling Stephanie "wife" when he talks about her to his gaming buddies, and he and Stephanie have both been mulling using some of their income tax return to elope at Hocking Hills.

Over coffee at a local café, Seth told David that he thinks highly of marriage. He is not against it. But he thinks about the circumstances of how his and Stephanie's relationship began—a spontaneous sexual encounter at a party that got too crazy, only days after breaking up with a girl whom he hoped to marry—and he wonders if that start can stand the test of time.

"Stephanie knows that I'll always be there for her, at the drop of a hat," he says, rubbing his hand through his white-blond hair. "And I will." But, with a heavy sigh, he adds, "I don't think that the way we started our relationship is grounds to get married on." Seth says that he and Stephanie have developed a strong love for each other. "We've been through shit," he says, "that makes us go at each other's throat, and we still come back together at the end of the day." But he agonizes over whether that love is strong enough to sustain them in marriage. "Yeah, you could be in a relationship for two years, and say that you love the other person," he says. "But do you really love them? Or are you just saying that after a while because you're boyfriend and girlfriend for a while, and that's what you say?"

He hunches forward and looks pensively at the floor, adding, "I also understand that having the family in the same house is very good. So that messes with

my head.” Seth grew up in an intact family—his college-educated parents are still married—and he says he would like to pass that kind of stability on to Aubrey.

For Aubrey is the center of Seth’s world, as is obvious to the casual observer. One afternoon Amber was visiting Stephanie when Seth, dressed in nice jeans and a blue GAP t-shirt, a rhinestone stud glistening in his right ear, returned from a job interview for a hospitality position at a local hotel. Seth gave Stephanie a long hug and then slumped into the wicker kiddie chair in front of their computer, which sits on a square black LACK table, the kind you get for \$9.99 at IKEA. Whenever Aubrey would make a cute noise, Seth would turn his head from the screen, his ice blue eyes brimming with pride and affection. He talked sweet baby talk, calling Aubrey “cutie patootie,” and reminding Stephanie that they should get Aubrey to bed at a decent time because she hasn’t been getting enough sleep lately. When

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Aubrey started whimpering, Seth scooped her up and took her to the back door to watch a stray cat lick clean the turkey bone that Stephanie had pitched outside after Thanksgiving. Then he made her bottle and took her upstairs for a nap.

Seth treasures these moments. So instead of splitting up or getting married, he finds himself in a tenuous, cohabiting relationship, not wanting to break up their fragile family, but not certain enough about the relationship to say “I do.”

Stephanie, who usually plays tough girl and admits with a hint of pride that she can be a “crazy psychotic bitch” when she wants to be, is moved to tears when

she thinks about the position her kids are in. It is the same life she had growing up, and one that she vowed to never repeat. Colton sees his dad occasionally, but not often enough to have much of a relationship. “I know exactly how Colton feels. And I never wanted my kids to feel like that,” Stephanie says, sipping a can of Sprite in between cigarettes. “I’d see other people with their dads, and I would want what my friend has,” she recalls. “Growing up all I wanted was my dad’s attention.”

Stephanie can count on one hand the things her dad did with her as a child. There was the time he helped her make recycled paper for a school project; the time he bought her a book about dinosaurs, which they cut up and glued into a shoebox and added twigs and rocks to make a “dinosaur nest”; the time they painted rocks like animals, which Stephanie later found out he still had locked up in a safe. “He’s real sentimental about them,” she said, relishing the thought.

Stephanie thinks that marriage would help give stability to her children, which they have not known so far. One night while Amber and Stephanie sat parked in her driveway, Stephanie grew quiet and looked out the window. A street lamp shone on an orange and blue Fisher Price slide sitting atop a patch of brown dirt, the grass worn away by children’s shoes. “I’m fine talking about me,” she said, “but when I talk about the children—that’s when I get really sad.”

Finding Common Ground in a Nation Coming Apart

THUS FAR, OUR NATION’S LEADERS HAVE PAID SCANT attention to the plight of Stephanie and Seth and their children, and other Middle Americans for whom marriage is disappearing. When the topic does come up, liberals and conservatives may disagree about the causes of this trend, or what to do about it. But there are emerging areas of common ground, evident for example in the recent *State of Our Unions* report, “The President’s Agenda for the Forgotten Sixty Percent,” authored by a team of ideologically diverse family scholars.

For instance, they suggest that we ought to expand apprenticeships so that people like Seth and Stephanie—instead of drifting from one low-paying service job to another and five years later demoralized, without work and money—are offered (if they want it) a clear pathway to steady work straight out of high school. They suggest that we eliminate unintended marriage penalties in our public assistance programs, so that if couples like Seth and Stephanie ever do gain the

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confidence to get married they will not lose their benefits the day they do the right thing and walk down the aisle. They call on Hollywood to engage in a conversation about depicting marriage and fatherhood in ways that inspire and support young adults' marriage aspirations.

When it comes to many social problems, the odds may be long and America's leaders may be slow to see results, but they remain admirably determined to implement reform. Why not rally the same hopeful resolve to give Seth and Stephanie's children better support when they form their own families? 

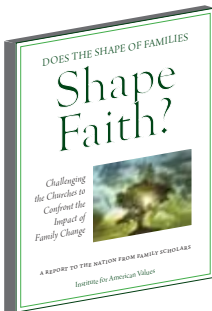
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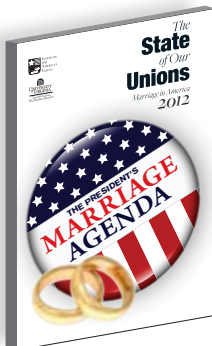
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Authored by Elizabeth Marquardt, Amy Zietlow, and Charles E. Stokes (Broadway Publications 2013). Available as a free PDF at www.CenterforMarriageandFamilies.org

Social scientists, psychologists, and practical theologians come together to offer new findings on how growing up in a divorced family impacts religious formation, with implications for the churches.



The State of Our Unions 2012: The President's Marriage Agenda for the Forgotten Sixty Percent

Edited by W. Bradford Wilcox and Elizabeth Marquardt (Broadway Publications 2012). Available as a free PDF at www.StateofOurUnions.org.

A team of family scholars offers a fresh set of family recommendations on tackling the striking, yet little-discussed decline in marriage among "Middle America" – the nearly sixty percent of Americans who have completed high school, but do not have a four-year college degree.