

## **WOBURN'S STEP-MOMS FILL A GAP AND MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

**by Marie Coady**

Hansel and Gretel's stepmother dumped them in the woods to get rid of them. Cinderella's stepmother belittled her and made her do all the dirty work. Demi Moore's character in the movie *St. Elmo's Fire* referred to her stepmother as her “step-monster”. It's a good thing Freddie hadn't heard any of these Fairy Tales before he met his step-mom, or he would have missed out on knowing the one person in his life who really cares about him.

The sad truth is, that the odds of Freddie ever having Fairy Tales read to him as a child, were the same as finding out that Amelia Earhart has been waitressing at Dunkin Donuts all these years. Freddie's mom preferred the drug scene in Lowell to Mother Goose. As a result, Freddie became, as he once referred to himself, “the kid in school who smelled”.

Today, instead of hearing Fairy Tales, Freddie is living one. It all began when his father remarried, and Maggie came into his life. Maggie saw the signs of neglect early on, but it was months before she could convince the authorities to have Freddie removed from his home.

If you're thinking at this point that Freddie must have lived in Lowell or Lawrence or some rundown tenement in Boston, think again. Freddie lived right here in Woburn, and he was and is not alone. There are a lot of Freddie's in Woburn.

Now you're probably thinking, Freddie must have lived in one of the housing developments in Woburn. Wrong again! Freddie lived a middle class nightmare in a split level house with a well-manicured lawn. But when the police pried open that fancy front door, what they found knocked their socks off.

Crack vials and needles littered every room and the mice competed with the cat for the garbage. All alone, among the litter, was a sick little boy with his head hung over a bucket and lying on a bare mattress. His “step-monster” had

called police after hours of trying to reach Freddie by phone. She knew something was very wrong, because it was his eighth birthday, and he had been excited about the new bike she had promised him. (His mother had sold his other one to buy drugs.)

Finally, the authorities took action and removed Freddie from his mother and placed him with his father and stepmother. Sounds like a happy ending, doesn't it? It's all over, and you don't have to think about it anymore. Someone has taken up the slack and are doing the job that we, as a community, should be doing by looking out for each other.

Well, it was only the beginning. First, there were the courts that declared the mother unable to care for herself and ordered the father to provide her with health care and continue the payments on her house, so she would have someplace to live. Then there were the visiting rights that allowed the mother to take Freddie on unsupervised visits and do a scene from *Camille* each time she returned him, after which she'd linger outside the front door screaming obscenities at her ex-husband and his new wife. There were also the midnight phone calls when Mommy Dearest would cry because she missed her baby.

The straw that broke Freddie's back occurred some years later when Mommy Dearest appeared outside Woburn High after school one day ready to claim him. She was on a drug induced high and began screaming, "My baby! My baby! Mommy's here!"

Needless to say Freddie made a run for it. He ran all the way home. He was so afraid his mother would kidnap him and drag him back to her world of darkness, he begged Maggie to help him get a restraining order - against his own mother. He had made a new life for himself, and he wanted no part of her world. He loved his stepmother, and just as Pinocchio wanted to become a real boy, Freddie wanted Maggie to become his real Mom. To him, she is everything a mother is supposed to be.

Now you'd think Freddie's father would be grateful to the woman who saved his son from a life doomed for failure, wouldn't you? Well, you'd be wrong. Freddie's father left Maggie after just a few years. He said the strain of everything was too much, and he couldn't handle all the confusion. Today Freddie and Maggie exist on the forty dollars a week the court ordered Daddy

to pay in support, and Maggie's small salary. But they wouldn't have it any other way.

Freddie's doing well. He's working part-time, struggling through college, and playing a varsity sport. Not bad for “the kid in school who smelled”.