

In the News: Christina Jenkins, Nursing

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Hinshaw/The Daily Courier.

Area of Study: Nursing

Christina Jenkins, 20, and her brother Paul, 17, laugh together while playing the Nintendo Wii at their Prescott Valley home Saturday afternoon. Earlier this year, a Yavapai County judge awarded Christina custody of Paul.



PRESCOTT VALLEY - One day when Paul Jenkins was 16, he thought he could get away with skipping his chores before school. But when he got home, his sister, Christina, 20, grounded him from using the car for a few days.

"I told him he could walk to school or ride the bus. It was his choice," Christina said.

Paul chose to ride the bus.

"That was embarrassing, being a high school junior riding the school bus," Paul said. But he never made that mistake again.

Skipping chores might not be a big deal in some families, but for Christina, who takes care of her brother on her own, it is.

Christina said she relies on Paul to help her with chores around the house since she works full time and studies in the nursing program at Yavapai College.

"He always helps me so much. He's doing such a great job, and I want it to stay that way," Christina said.

Christina said she's proud of Paul, now 17, who maintains As and Bs in his classes at Bradshaw Mountain High School.

Occasionally, though, she does have to discipline him by taking away his cell phone or his game system when he doesn't do what he's supposed to.

"We make it work well, though," Christina said. "It is a good balance."

Christina and Paul are part of a growing national trend of people raising their own brothers and sisters because of divorce, death, serious illness or a parent going to jail. In 2009, nearly 2.9 million children in America lived with relatives other than their parents, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Relatives other than grandparents raising related children account for 780,000 of those cases.

About 140,000 siblings currently raise their own brothers and sisters. That number increased considerably over the past 14 years that the Census Bureau tracked family living situations other than the traditional two-parent household.

Siblings raising their brothers and sisters often face issues dealing with challenging relationships, managing finances, refining their parenting skills, handling work, school and medical issues as well as taking care of themselves, according to Joyce Stout at Michigan State University, who runs kinship workshops to help adults, other than parents, with family bonds to the children they are raising.

Christina and Paul came to this point after their maternal grandmother stepped down as their guardian because of advanced age and increased stress.

When Christina sought help from Chester McLaughlin's law office to gain custody of Paul, he initially told her it would never happen.

On April 16, 1994, Betsy Ann Jenkins, Christina and Paul's mother, died after being shot with a sawed-off shotgun at the Sierra Hotel in Prescott. On Jan. 11, 2006, Yavapai County Superior Court Judge Raymond W. Weaver sentenced Christopher Jenkins, Christina and Paul's father, to 20 years in the Arizona Department of Corrections, community supervision after his release, and restitution after finding him guilty of second-degree murder in Betsy's death.

Afterwards, Christina and Paul lived with their paternal grandparents in their father's home. Their grandmother died after Christina turned 12, so she helped her grandfather by making dinner, taking care of Paul, cleaning the house, and helping to pay the bills.



"I realized I had to step up to the plate," Christina said.

Four years later, their grandfather died. "Paul and I were close when we were little," Christina said. "When our grandfather passed, we got really close."

Soon afterward, their maternal grandmother moved in to help with expenses and to supervise Christina and Paul. When Christina returned from a temporary move to Oregon in January 2008, she learned her grandmother had moved some relatives into her father's house and she asked them to leave.

"That situation wasn't what we wanted, and it wasn't working out well," Christina said.

At that point, Christina took full responsibility for herself and her brother, continuing to work full-time for the Town of Prescott Valley's Parks and Recreation division, as she had since high school.

After McLaughlin heard her story, he decided to take her Legal Aid case. At the custody hearing, McLaughlin said both Christina and Paul's father and Paul's current guardian, their maternal grandmother, approved of Christina serving as guardian for her brother.

After asking Christina some questions, Yavapai County Superior Court Judge David L. Mackey turned his attention to Paul.

"When I grant this, she's going to officially be in charge," Mackey said. "Are you going to listen to her advice and do what she says to do?"

"Yes," Paul said.

"It is unusual to have a sister appointed as guardian for her brother," Mackey said. "I looked carefully through the file, and this is an appropriate case. Ms. Jenkins is a proper person to serve as guardian."

Paul and Christina smiled and hugged after the hearing before they headed off to school and college classes.

"It helps being closer in age," Christina said. "I've been through what he's going through just three years ago, so I can give helpful advice."

A usual day for the Jenkins begins at 5:15 a.m. so Paul can drop Christina off at work by 6 a.m., then drive himself to school. When Paul finishes classes, he picks Christina up from work. Then they head to swim practice for Paul's team that Christina helps out with as an assistant coach until 5 p.m. Afterward, they come home for a quick dinner, Paul starts his homework and Christina attends evening college classes.

A schedule like that might daunt some people, but Christina and Paul said they're both so independent that it keeps them focused.

Paul said he enjoys swim team, playing hockey, art class, student council and hanging out with his friends at Bradshaw Mountain High School. His only regret was not finishing his paperwork to get into National Honor Society on time.

Paul looks forward to going to college like his sister, but right now he'd like to work at being a leader in the non-denominational Christian ministry Young Life.

The Jenkins meet their expenses with what Christina earns from work and their father sends money when he can. Christina said it also helps that Paul has worked for Prescott Valley Parks and Recreation for the past two years to help with expenses. Christina and Paul said their relationship with their father remains strong and they call him each week and drive to see him each month. Christina said he gives them good advice, and urges them to do well in school.

When they were younger, they missed not coming home to spend time with their mom and dad each day - especially Paul.

"I got frustrated sometimes," Paul said. "It's hard for kids that age to be different." "Sometimes when people complain about their mom and dad, it makes me sad that I can't have the chance to be with them," Paul said. But they both feel blessed to have grandparents who cared for them so much, Christina said.

McLaughlin said he's proud that both Christina and Paul have never been involved in criminal activities or drugs.

"At a time when everyone looks for an excuse to fail, Christina and Paul prevail in spite of overwhelming obstacles," McLaughlin said.

Attending nursing school full-time at the Verde Valley campus four days a week and continuing to work full-time means a busier schedule and more pressure, but Christina said she's enjoying it.

Christina said her relationship with Paul is changing as he becomes more adult, takes on increased responsibilities and expresses more independence. Still, they remain close, supportive and focused on their goals.