

Beyond the Bar

Para-kin: Defining Our Relationships



Bar Member Debra L. Chernick with her para-husband Brian.

Our mission is to add words to our vocabulary and dictionary which will accurately reflect, describe and embrace evolving family relationships through the promotion of para-kin terms.

Attorney Debra L. Chernick sat in a local hospital emergency room, anxiously trying to finish the formality of intake paperwork, allowing her to meaningfully participate in the care of her longtime partner. Acquaintance, friend, or spouse, nothing accurately described their relationship. The absence of a legally-recognized relationship suddenly became a barrier. As alarming as it was to realize she didn't have any legal standing to make decisions on her partner's behalf, it wasn't until months later that a possible solution came to her. "My life partner resolved some household catastrophe, and I turned to him and said, 'Honey, you are as wonderful as any para-hubby could be!'" From her experience and this domestic interaction, came the idea for a term that could answer not only Deb's dilemma, but also a situation faced by many other people, in a word, *para-kin*.

An outgrowth of the word paralegal, meaning support, Deb embraced the prefix and determined to share her concept with others through the creation of a website, www.para-kin.com. According to Debra's para-kin website, "Our mission is to add words to our vocabulary and dictionary which will accurately reflect, describe and embrace evolving family relationships through the promotion of para-kin terms." Such words certainly would be helpful in legal situations, such as Deb and her partner experienced at the hospital. Deb notes, "As family court attorneys, we know our clients are often in situations of blended families. Regardless of their love, many people shy away from the prefix *step* (i.e., stepmother, stepfather). There seems to be a subliminal connection between step and evil. Para-kin offers positive alternatives." She points out a similar situation with another descriptive prefix. "In precisely the same way the designation of *Ms.* filled a void in our language and culture in the 1960s, there is a need to provide positive words to describe some of the non-traditional close relationships that exist today."

Perusing the para-kin website at www.para-kin.com, one encounters public

testimonials of support and gratitude for the noticeably sensitive issue she is addressing. One reader, Marc, writes, "As blended families in transition, from all strata of our socio-economic spectrum, search for language that appropriately describes their relationships with new family members, they will find that para-kin is a wonderful new descriptor that captures the essence of close family connections in a positive and heartfelt manner."

Deb believes the same thing, as she was inspired to create the concept of para-kin for that reason. "It's about gaps in the English language...our language does not provide words for this type of relationship. In fact, English lacks the words for many loving connections."

For now, para-kin is an idea, but with increasing interest and support, stimulated by the para-kin website and a growing cadre of believers, Deb hopes that someday it may become a means by which we can define our relationships to each other and under the law. ❖

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