

## Blended, Brady-Style

I spent my childhood glued to the TV set, enchanted by my fictional friends Marcia, Jan, Cindy, Greg, Peter and Bobby. But more so than the step-siblings who made up TV's most popular blended family, it was their parents who captivated my imagination and I would have happily traded in my intact nuclear family to live with the bedazzling widowers Carol and Mike Brady, who found each other, married and became *The Brady Bunch*.

Back then in the early 1970s, we were recent immigrants from South America — four disoriented kids and two bewildered parents trying to navigate a foreign culture. It didn't help that as a couple, our parents were combative. As individuals, their tempers flared at what I then thought were the slightest misdemeanors. So what if my 16-year-old sister had come home four hours past her curfew, for example? My dad smoked feverishly to reduce his stress. My mother coped by regularly threatening to send our teeth flying across the room.

Mrs. Brady never raised her voice. Despite a houseful of rambunctious kids, none of them ever worked on her last nerve. "Mike...!" she'd sing out angelically whenever a blended-family issue came up. And there Mr. Brady would be, at his home office drawing table, ready to problem-solve wisely, not an ashtray in sight. The Bradys always knew what to do. And they always provided the added value of a life lesson for whichever kid was involved in that week's crisis.

Fast-forwarding some 35 years, I never dreamed I'd have the chance to be Mrs. Brady. Divorced for a decade while raising three very lovely girls of my own, combining my family with someone else's was never on my agenda until I met a man I couldn't resist. So after four-and-a-half years, my fiancé Glen and I moved in together last year, schlepping our children along for the ride. His son, 14, and daughter, 17, plus my 21-year-old twins and 15-year-old daughter, make us quite the bunch.

It's fortuitous that Glen has Mike Brady's gentle disposition. He rarely gets rattled, even with five teenagers in the house all

at once. Shortly after moving in, though, I realized I could never live up to Carol's reputation: By virtue of being perky and having hair of gold, right off the bat Mrs. Brady won the affections of stepsons Greg, Peter and Bobby. I'm a brunette and constantly trying not to fly off the handle. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

I snarl at Glen when one of the kids upsets me. See, as parents, Glen and I are on opposite poles. And unlike the Bradys, who swiftly resolved differences within their allotted weekly half hour, we rarely come up with quick-fixes, our problems sometimes festering endlessly.

Still, we have learned some valuable lessons in the past year. When some family difficulty erupts, we address it. When we become defensive about our own offspring, pointing fingers at one

another's kids, we control ourselves. We don't parent each other's children. We do rely on each other for support and also advice, and sometimes even put it into effect. And we take this blending of families very seriously because we just don't want to screw up our incredibly loving, joyful partnership.

So when things get really hairy, we fall back on someone who is way smarter than we are about this sort of situation: our family therapist, who's on speed dial. We'll trample over everyone and drop everything on our schedules for a coveted appointment. Dr. Dowds is so effective I once asked her if she could move in with us. She thought I was joking. But over this year, she's helped us navigate through this murky territory more often than I care to admit. She puts our issues into perspective, gives us renewed hope that this can work, and offers priceless guidance. No one has taken up tobacco; no one has threatened dental dislocations. We're ultra-fortunate to have her on stand-by, and now that I think of it, we're far better off than those smug Bradys ever were. After all, they only had Alice.

*Freelance journalist Claudia Gryvatz Copquin is planning her second nonfiction book, this one a humorous look at her real-life blended family.*

