Robert Dennis Patton, age 46

Denise Renee Patton, age 43

Leigh Kay, age 15

Arnold Robert, age 6 1/2

Robert and Denise have known each other since high school. They married 23 years ago, when Robert was 23 and Denise was 20. Both were in college at the time.

The first few years of their marriage, Robert and Denise focused on career building. Robert became a licensed real estate broker while Denise became a software designer, receiving her BS in information sciences from a major university.

When Denise was 28 and Robert 31, Leigh was born. Denise took 6 weeks off from her job at a bank and then returned to work. After 6 months, she found it too difficult to work full time and be a parent. She left the bank, and since then, she has worked a series of part-time jobs. At first she looked for work in her field, but it was difficult for her to find work that fit her busy schedule as a parent. About 8 years ago, she was laid off from her last software job when her firm downsized. Her career devolved into odd jobs and then into volunteer work. Denise has not had a paying job for about 5 years, and her last job was a brief 3-month stint as a receptionist for Robert’s real estate business, filling in for an employee on medical leave. A number of her volunteer posts have involved some pretty heavy computer programming.

Robert is another story. He has built a successful real estate brokerage and does well financially. Of course, a benefit of being a real estate broker is that Robert gains knowledge of emerging real estate opportunities. He has purchased several properties, including one he acquired jointly with his father and his father’s wife (his stepmother).

Leigh, the Pattons’ older child, is in her first year of high school and is doing well. An easygoing and accommodating child, Leigh is an avid equestrian, and 2 years ago the Pattons bought her Midnight, a retired hunting gelding. Midnight is kept at a local stable under an equi-lease agreement by which the family receives discounted boarding in return for lending Midnight out to other riders at the stable.

Arnie, Leigh’s younger brother, is another story. Arnie is in kindergarten at the local public school. Since he was a toddler, Arnie has been different from Leigh. Arnie has boundless energy and cannot sit still, even by kindergarten standards. Denise has talked to the educational team several times about Arnie’s adjustment. He appears to be very bright, but he is falling behind in his readiness skills. He is finding it hard to get along with other children and is constantly in trouble. There has been a great deal of friction in the family over Arnie’s troubles, which have been evident since preschool. He is becoming increasingly oppositional at home, and Denise monitors him constantly to try to keep him out of trouble and to guide him through his homework.

Denise says that Arnie obviously has a neurological difference that makes him incapable of conforming to the school’s environment, and she wants him evaluated by a neuropsychologist. Robert has never taken much stock in shrinks and says that they are a waste of time and money. Denise, on the other hand, feels that she is dyslexic, and she has a close relative with manic depression, so she has interacted closely with mental health professionals.

Over the past 3 years, Denise has become more and more absorbed in trying to deal with what she characterizes as Arnie’s special needs. At first, Robert and Denise engaged in screaming matches over how best to parent Arnie. Then they both withdrew, with Robert sleeping on the couch and neither speaking much to the other. Denise, who has always struggled with her weight, gained 40 pounds.

One morning about 6 months ago, Robert arrived at the breakfast table with a suitcase and announced that he would not be returning home in the evening. “The marriage is over,” he explained to a shocked Denise. Since that time he has periodically returned home to pick up personal items and to see Arnie, but otherwise he has refused to communicate with Denise. He never did speak much with Leigh and has not really had an opportunity to do so since leaving, except to briefly greet her in passing.

Both Robert and Denise sought legal consultation. They were each asked to fill out the accompanying financial statements.

DENISE PATTON – CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION

I’m 43 years old and live in Anytown, USA, with my two dear children, Leigh, age 15, and Arnie, age 6 1/2. My life fell apart 6 months ago when my husband, Rob, suddenly walked out on us.

Rob and I were high school sweethearts, and I couldn’t imagine life with anyone else. We married in college. I became a computer programmer, and Rob went into real estate. I worked for a while in a bank, but when we had Leigh, it was like a revelation. I realized that being a mother was more important to me than anything in the world. I’ve been a stay-at-home mom since Leigh was small, and I’m glad. Leigh has grown up into a wonderful young woman, and I have been needed at home because of Arnie’s special problems.

Arnie has always been a special and different sort of child. I knew right away that he was different. He was very high energy and curious as an infant—he crawled early, he walked early, he ran early, and he was always into everything. He never slept through the night, and even now at age 6 I find him in bed with me every night. And he’s up at 4:30 a.m. every day, ready to rock and roll. It’s clear to me that Arnie has significant disabilities. He cannot control himself in the classroom. I’m constantly being called by that darn teacher about it. She has no insight! She has this shallow, authoritarian attitude—she recommends nothing but reward and punishment systems. I tried one of her behavior charts for about 2 weeks and it just made things worse. We have an uphill fight ahead of us to qualify him for an Individualized Educational Plan. I have had to devote more and more of my time to Arnie and taking care of him, managing his behavior, and so forth. It takes everything I have. The fight to get Arnie what he needs is being undermined by Rob’s ridiculous attitude. He thinks Arnie’s problem is that he’s spoiled.

Rob has gotten more and more distant since Arnie was born. He spends all of his free time at the office, and during the couple of years before he left, we barely spoke except to fight about Arnie. Rob is afraid of admitting that Arnie has problems. I think he feels it reflects badly on him to have a disabled son. When I suggested that Arnie needed to be evaluated, he flew into a rage. I’m sure that Rob’s attitude and distant behavior is making Arnie worse.

The last time Rob and I had a really substantial conversation, he berated me for paying more attention to my children than to keeping the house perfect. He called me a fat pig and said that I was responsible for all the problems in the family. Not only that, but he has all the money and he uses it to control me and keep me down. He’s an abuser, pure and simple, but I would take him back in a minute to save our family. If he won’t come back, I will need the house, and because I won’t be able to work, I will need for him to pay the mortgage, plus child support and alimony. He will probably need to pay for Arnie’s and the family’s therapy costs and the costs of special education for Arnie unless I can succeed in my efforts to have the school pay. I won’t ask for much—just to keep the standard of living we have. Rob is super rich; he and his family have innumerable real estate properties and they can just sell one of them to fund his child’s future.

Rob refuses to help out at all, except to pay the mortgage and to give me a little for groceries and other odds and ends. I have had to borrow from my parents just to make ends meet, and they can’t keep giving me money. Whenever Rob comes to see Arnie, he does nothing but criticize me. I feel like the world is coming to an end; I feel so disoriented and depressed. Sometimes I want to kill myself. But Arnie and Leigh need me.

ROB PATTON – CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION

I’ve finally had enough. I have been in this God-forsaken marriage for 23 years, and I’m tired of being the only oarsman on the boat. I work 65-hour weeks to provide for my family, and Denise just sits home and gets fat. She used to work and seem interested in life. Now it’s all just about Arnie’s alleged problems—Arnie has a learning disability, Arnie has a brain problem, etc. If she ever disciplined him, these supposed problems would evaporate. I spoke to the school, and that’s what they said; he just needs his mom to give him a good swift kick once in a while. Instead, she rewards his misconduct with attention. You’d think they were joined at the hip. When I would come into a room it wasn’t even “Hi, Rob, how was your day.” If she acknowledged me at all, it was usually something like, “Arnie really acted out today in school. We’ve got to get moving on his neuro whatchamacallit.” Usually she didn’t even look up. Well, if she thinks I’m going to support this sick approach to raising kids, she’d better think again. Now in my puny little apartment I suppose I’m lonely, but at least when I walk in the door there’s no one there ignoring me.

Now she’s making that big sucking noise—the noise that says, “you will need to cough up really big bucks to send Arnie to therapy, a special school, all that nonsense.” Not one cent is going to a shrink. Arnie is a normal active kid who just needs discipline. None of the effort I put into being a provider is appreciated in the least; she just wants to get more and more out of me. Meanwhile, she sits at home. As my cousin Frank says, good riddance.

LEIGH PATTON – CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION

My parents, after years of stupid arguments, split up a few months ago. I really don’t think any of this is fair. My dad has never paid any attention to me; he could care less whether I’m dead or alive, but my mom used to be really nice. The operative words here are used to. Since my brother came along, she has just gotten really screwed up. She stopped being interested in stuff. Lots of times I would come home and find her lying in her bed in the dark, or I’d find her crying. I would ask her what was wrong and what I could do about it, but she wouldn’t give me an answer, or she would say some stupid thing about Arnie and his needs. Now dad’s left altogether. I don’t really miss that cold fish, but he could have paid me the common courtesy of telling me he was going and explaining why.

And then there’s Arnie. What a pain in the backside. Mom lets him get away with murder. When I was 6, she would never let me do half the stuff she lets him do. I have had to stop going out in public with them. Sometimes he would do something horrible—like last month, when he kicked my friend and pulled him to the ground—and she doesn’t really punish him. She just talks to him sweetly about it and he just does it some more. I’m really mortified. It’s easier to just spend my days talking to my friends or riding Midnight, my horse.

And speaking of Midnight, this is where it really gets horrible. Mom says Arnie needs special schooling and therapy. I don’t know; maybe he does and maybe he doesn’t. She says that dad refuses to help pay for it, and if we don’t get some more money, she will have to sell Midnight. I just don’t think that’s fair. Both of them should just grow up. I have a boyfriend, but I refuse to get married—even when I am old enough to move out.

ARNIE PATTON – CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION

I am 6 years old and I go to Miss Mellon’s kindergarten class. My daddy went away because I was a bad boy and he doesn’t like me anymore. I want my daddy to come back and live with me. I promise not to be bad anymore. When I am bad it makes Mommy sad and then Daddy gets mad, and then they have a fight. It makes me sad when Daddy is not in my house at night, and it makes me cry. Also when I am in school I get really, really mad sometimes. School is stupid and I am stupid.

I love my mommy and my big sister. My sister has a black horse named Midnight. Sometimes I get to ride him. He is at the stables. But where is Daddy? Where is his bed? Does he have to sleep on the floor? Who feeds him? He should come home and then I would make him breakfast and he would be OK.