

GO ASK DAD: Good Will Good Legacy

Pioneer Press

If you're looking for something uplifting to watch for Father's Day, I recommend you don't rent "About Schmidt."

It's the story of a sad, lonely man (played wonderfully by Jack Nicholson) who is desperately trying to convince his daughter that she's making a dreadful mistake.

Too late. His chances to communicate with his adult daughter evaporated years earlier for reasons that are both apparent and mysterious. All he can do, finally, is to mouth the platitudes she wants to hear, in the interest of maintaining some connection to her.

It's not the kind of place a father in his 60s wants to find himself, and it's not the kind of movie you want to put into the DVD on Father's Day. But the film resonated with Les Kotzer. He sees guys like Warren Schmidt all the time.

Kotzer is a Toronto attorney who co-wrote the book "The Family Fight," which outlines all the ways a well-intentioned parent can turn his or her family into a battleground or a collection of cold shoulders. "I'm a wills and estates lawyer," Kotzer says. "I focus on the avoidance of family fighting. I'm trying to provide preventative medicine."

He mentions the father-daughter relationship in "About Schmidt" as typical of those he sees in his practice. Resentments can build over the years, and they are exacerbated because of economic issues. A man like Schmidt works hard and saves his money so he can retire in some comfort, while his children spend money they don't have and count on Dad to bail them out.

"A lot of kids are waiting for and depending on their inheritance," Kotzer says. "The issue is going to get worse as we live on."

It often spills over when the parent dies — especially if the parents and the children don't talk about what they want and expect from each other while the parents are still alive.

"I saw a woman carrying a crystal vase in my parking lot," Kotzer says. "She said, 'I bought this for my mother for her 75th birthday, and I would like it back.' We said it belongs to the estate; the estate said all those personal effects are to be sold and the money divided.

"So, she dropped it and said, 'Now, nobody can have it.' "

If she had told her mother she wanted the vase, her mother might well have put that in her will. But without specific instructions, there was nothing the attorneys could do.

"I hear this often: 'My kids will work this out. They love each other,' " Kotzer says. "Don't assume good will between your children. You can be masters of the destruction of your own family. I'll have parents come in to me and trivialize personal items. One of the things kids fight over is not just the money but the memories in the house."

Take this Father's Day as an opportunity to look at what you will eventually leave behind — not just the memories and not just the possessions but the intentions. Otherwise, your kids are likely to be paying a visit to someone like Les Kotzer.