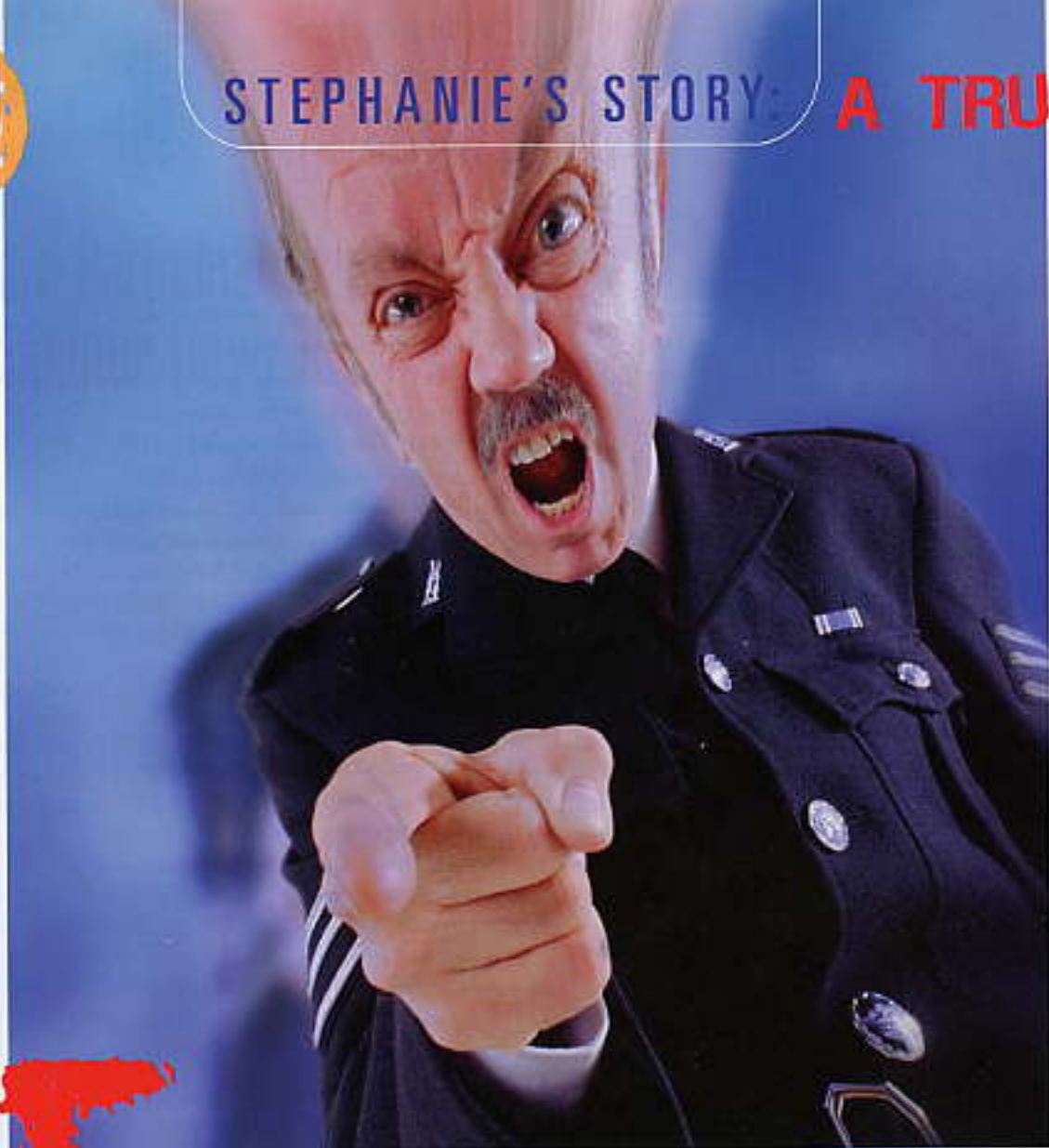




STEPHANIE'S STORY: A TRUE TALE



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The disapproving looks many parents of children with bleeding disorders have to bear from people on the street makes a sense of humor and a calm disposition essential commodities. Stephanie,* a young mother of two boys with hemophilia from Augusta, Georgia, is usually very good at ignoring the stares she receives when it is summer and her son's bruised arms are on prominent display. Once in a rare while, though, she feels the need to respond. When one particularly rueful woman asked quite bluntly, "What's wrong with your son?" she leaned in close and nonchalantly said, "Oh, he was just being bad so I threw him down."

BY MICHAEL COFFINO

OF FALSE ACCUSATIONS

On one particular summer day though, sarcasm was certainly not in order when an eight-month pregnant Stephanie was shopping at Wal-Mart with her young son for supplies for his birthday party, which was the next day. Her son was in his baby carriage wearing shorts and a tank top. According to Stephanie, "Of course he was covered in bruises. He's one year old, he just started walking and he has severe factor IX deficiency hemophilia." She paid for her merchandise and was stopped at the exit by a Wal-Mart security guard. Without explanation, Stephanie was told that she was being held and that she must wait for the police to arrive. "So, I waited for a minute," Stephanie said, "but then I really got mad. The security guard proceeded to tell me that someone reported seeing abuse."

At this point, Stephanie did what she was taught to do by her hemophilia treatment center doctors and nurses in case of such an occurrence: show the accusing party a copy of a letter from her doctor explaining her son's condition. Believing that by doing this she would be allowed to leave, she produced the letter. This was to no avail, though, because the security guard would not even glance at the document. When the police arrived, Stephanie thought that upon seeing the letter, they would politely apologize for the inconvenience and she would be home in no time. Instead, she claims, "I went to show the police officer the letter and he wouldn't look at it either. He then attempted to put handcuffs on me. He said they were going to take my son to the back of the store until a social worker got there and I said, 'No, you're not.' The officer said, 'Are you refusing?' and I said, 'Yes, I am.'"

Before there was a melee, the social worker arrived in the nick of time to intervene and return a bit of sanity to the situation. "I showed the social worker my document, and she turned to the security guard and said, 'Ma'am, why can't you look at this? This is what she's supposed to carry with her to show people like you who are making accusations of abuse.' The security guard said that she was always

taught to simply call the authorities. The social worker then asked the police officer, 'You were going to put handcuffs on her? For what reason?' The police said that they felt that since the child looked abused, that was what they needed to do."

The social worker proceeded to ask if anyone involved had seen Stephanie abuse her son. All parties said that they hadn't. The social worker was astounded. "I can't believe none of you looked at this document the mother is carrying," the social worker said, "That's your job. It would be a different story if this woman had no identification as to why her child has all these bruises, but she did." At this point, the police were very concerned about the possible legal actions Stephanie might take and they emphatically asked her not to file a lawsuit.

Wal-Mart has never issued a formal apology for the actions of their security guard that day, and although she hasn't given up shopping at Wal-Mart, Stephanie has given up on shopping at that particular store. Even when she was vindicated by the social worker, Stephanie still felt like a criminal,

judging from the responses of all involved. "When it was all over, they still looked at me as if they didn't believe me," she claims. There have been some other changes since this event, such as the introduction of medical identification bracelets for her sons and a newfound understanding of would-be accusers. "You get really tired of people looking at you like you're an abuser, but now that I'm older and I think about it in a way it's good that people look at parents who have children who are bruised. There aren't many children with hemophilia out there, and it's good that people are concerned and wonder if a child is being abused or not." 📌

* Last name not used for reasons of confidentiality.



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