

Large Families: Yes We Can!

By Nick Chui

Families with 7 or 8 children in modern day Singapore? You've got to be kidding! Yes these mythical families do exist. In fact, I've just met two of them (sets of families that is). And I would like you to meet them too. Don't worry, they won't bite.

An afternoon with the Pngs.

"Why don't you interview the kids instead at our place?" replied Gladys, when I requested to speak to her and her husband Damien about their large family. "They will be glad to tell you the truth."

I smiled at the tongue-in-cheek humor.

A virtual stranger coming into a house where at least 9 pairs of eyes scrutinizing you?

Not a very exciting prospect.

Both medical doctors, home for Damien and Gladys Png is a large detached house at Sunset Vale which they share with their seven children and Damien's parents.

When I arrived on a hot Sunday afternoon, the house was being renovated and I had to be careful not to step on anything. This added to the chaos (some might say vibrancy) which one experiences when visiting a large family.

"Come everybody; gather at the table, we've got Nick here who wants to ask you guys questions!" Gladys' said in a half-commanding half-cheerful tone to her children.

Nigel 14, was slouching on the couch watching a re-run of world wrestling entertainment. Looking slightly bored, he rose lazily from his couch, switched off the TV and gave me that skeptical look only teenagers can muster.

Noel 12, on the other hand was busy making his favourite chocolate and vanilla drink which he generously offered to mum (with the reassurance that it is not poisoned)

And Naomi 5, the youngest was very enthusiastic and was already at the table waiting.

The rest of the children, the eldest

Nicholas 18, Nathaniel 17, Neville 10 and Nadya 8, quickly joined in.

"Would you like a biscuit?" asked little Naomi offering me one from a container. I smiled at her generosity and consideration.

As I was about to begin, Damien came around with a camcorder and waved to his children. "Just for the record" he smiled. "Not that our children will be inhibited of course."

I gulped slightly. "Well, I began; your mum told me that it would be good to ask the children what they think of having so many siblings..."

The eldest Nicholas got my drift. "To be honest, Dad and mum wanted a girl so they kept trying until they got one".

Nadya, the eldest girl blushed while the rest of the children giggled.

"So do you guys regret your mum and Dad's decision?" I asked.

"Well we never had to worry that we do not have friends" chimed Noel.

"And when we go for holidays outings or to church, everybody notices us." Added Nathaniel.

Indeed, Church is an important part of the Pngs life. The family sings together at the 11am mass at the Church of the Holy Cross. Family prayer is also a regular feature in the household.

"We try to pray together as a family everyday but it is difficult as both of us are working" shared Damien.

"Sometimes we pray the rosary, but to add a bit of variation, we throw in a bit of bible reading and reflection."

"Er, are any of your children thinking of priesthood or religious life"? I asked, hoping to do some "recruiting" for the Archdiocese.

"Well," replied Gladys, "they must have a calling but I won't obstruct if God calls."

Little Naomi wanted to contribute something but it seems that we have forgotten her.

"Hrmmph, nobody seems to notice me" she exclaims and before I could apologize, she runs off to grandma with a pout.

"Does this happen often?" I asked.

"Yes it does," interjected Damien. "I guess being the youngest, we sometimes forget her. But don't worry, we will make it up to her and she will forget it soon and come round."

The afternoon I spent with them was filled with spontaneous jokes and friendly jibes from both parents and children. Damien related for instance that Neville once took his handphone containing the telephone numbers of his colleagues in the hospital to show off to his friends.

"He is a bit blur, but sweet natured" shared Gladys. "He wanted to show his friends his Dad's cool handphone." Neville smiled sheepishly.

"Mum, you're going to film the floor" exclaimed Nigel when Gladys offered to take over the filming from her husband.

I was very much taken in by the rich family life experienced by the Pngs. Nevertheless, I wondered if I could meet another family, perhaps one from the "heartlands".

Dinner with the Kwoks

Joseph and Terri Kwok, presenters with Engaged Encounter (EE) generously invited me to their HDB home in the heartland of Pasir Ris to share a meal and chat with them. Over a meal of chicken rice and lots of laughter from their children, I proceeded to ask Joseph and Terri the "big question." Why 8 children?

"Well", explained Joseph, "I remembered attending an engaged encounter weekend with Terri. There was a segment where we asked to write down how many children you hope to have with your wife." When I nervously wrote "4", I thought Terri will kill me. Little did I know that she would write "6".



Joseph 49 with wife Terri 48 and their children Andre 21, Reuben 14, Deidre 22, Charlotte 17, Beth 23, Fabian 12, Thomasina 19, Antoine 7.

"Both of us were from large families" explained Terri, "and were thus very open to the possibility of having a large family ourselves. Besides, Fr Joseph Tan who was involved in Engaged Encounter was at that time enthusiastically promoting the pro-life message and encouraging couples to consider having large families. Contraception was out of the question for me as I do not want to tamper with my body which is perfectly healthy. Natural Family Planning was of course effective if you need to limit the number of children but practicing it is also a call to be aware and in awe of God's gift of life. And that too was a contributing factor."

"What holds your family together?" I asked. Do you have any house rules which all must abide?

"We try to be as flexible with our children as possible but we have a few non-negotiables," shared Joseph. "Sunday Mass as a family is a must, also attending birthday parties of relatives, even those whom we don't know very well and finally having family meals." This, I believe, instills discipline in our children and a sense of duty. You don't just do what you like to do, but what is right. And besides, when you put your heart into it, you realise that the right thing, attending Mass on Sunday for example is not a chore after all but a joy."

Indeed, discipline seems a very necessary virtue for a large family. To save money, most meals are taken together at home with the occasional treat in the restaurant on special occasions where Terri, a homemaker whips up delicious yet simple fare. While not being able to go for ballet or piano lessons when they were younger, Joseph and Terri were eager for their children to enjoy swimming, cycling and other outdoor activities.

"Family bonding is very important for us", shares Joseph. "When we go for holidays for instance, while we are unable to bring the whole family along, we take turns to bring at least 2 of our children so that we spend quality time with them. The rest will remain at home and when they were younger, my in-laws will come over to watch over them. Now that they are older, I would ask the oldest to take care of them."

"Yup" shared Beth 23, the oldest in the family. And if the rest tell me that "you are not mum so why should I listen to you", I will simply let mum know that they said so!" she shared with a mischievous grin.

Indeed, the respect and affection the children have for their parents was what struck me the most. All of them sang at their parent's recent 25th anniversary thanksgiving mass at the Church of St Bernadette. When the older children, took part time jobs during the school holidays, they gave their parents a treat from the money they earned.

And when I asked the children if they too would have a large family like their parents, Thomasina 19, spontaneously declared, "no way, two for me is enough! Seriously, I am not as strong as mum and dad!"

I was deeply impressed by the maturity of Joseph's children and the palpable joy they radiated simply being with each other. I learned a few "family secrets" too.

Reuben 14 for instance shared that he wants to be pope, not of course, before first becoming Singapore idol, to the guffaws of his younger brother Fabian 12.

And Antoine 7, shared that his teacher refused to believe that he had 7 other siblings. He also insisted that he is old enough to be called a man to the bemusement of his elder sister Deidre 22 who politely enquired whether he had hair in his armpits and whether all his baby teeth have fallen out.

As I said farewell to Joseph, Terri and their beautiful family, and recalled my time with the Pngs, I was reminded of the sentence from psalm 127. "Truly children are a gift from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward... Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them!"

The joy of a large family. That is something money cannot buy.



The Png children: from left, Nadya, Neville, Nigel, Naomi, Nicholas, Nathaniel, Noel.