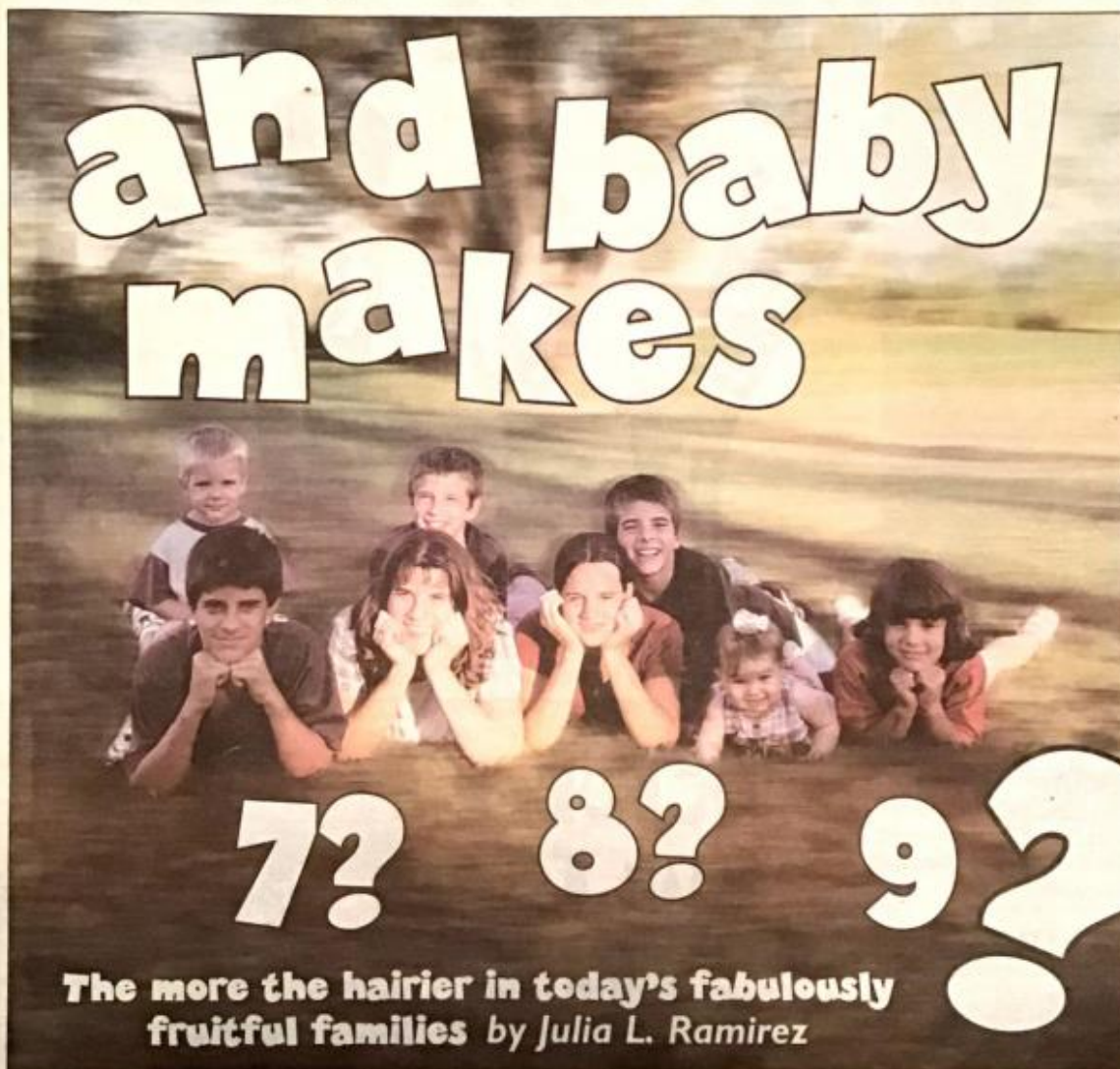


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and baby
makes

7? 8? 9?

**The more the hairier in today's fabulously
fruitful families** by Julia L. Ramirez

In this Issue: *Hip Mama's in town, Chiropractic for Kids*

Joe agrees that Katy has heard a lot more remarks than he has: "I've only had one incident with one woman who went on and on about 'Who has five kids these days,' and that makes you feel kind of bad." But his colleagues have been very supportive, his boss in particular. He's told Joe to take as much time off as he needs around the babies' birth. "It really helps ease my mind, too. So, when I start to lose it I can call up Joe and say, 'Come home for an hour.'" Katy says with relief.

Katy hasn't forgotten the days when she was working outside the home. She misses the money, but even more, she says she misses "the 'women factor'—the camaraderie. That's why I work, eight hours a week. It gets me out of the house; it gets me seeing differ-

ent faces. It's not the money, really, it's just the communication with other people." She believes she'd be working part-time at American Express if they were still living in Minneapolis. There, they had a wonderful day-care provider, "So I'd still be working... maybe four days a week."

But she does appreciate being around when the kids come home from school. "It was an incredible hassle bundling up the boys—at eight weeks old—to drop them off at day care. So, now, it's really nice. Joe takes care of the morning, gets the boys up, dressed, fed, and out the door. I take care of the 'pick-up' part; I will do the afternoon thing."

There are times she wonders if the boys

appreciate that she's at home. "I'm 'just home.' Every once in awhile it kind of hits me. They loved day care; it was like a home. Now I'm just a replacement for Bonnie [the day care provider]." Jenny and the babies will have a whole different perspective on their mother. "They'll never—knock on wood—really know me going to work. And the boys, until they were six, were in day care." Katy has a group of friends she can go to the park with "and complain about it [staying at home]. You can say, 'My kids are just too much for me, they're driving me crazy,' and you know you're not the only one going through that. [It's] a nice support network. I think there are a lot more stay-at-home mothers here [in Northfield, than in the city]. It

helps!" The kids come back into the room and Katy introduces me to "... one of our single friends. He gets his family fix when he comes over. You want to see what it's like, 'Okay, here you go.' He has seen family dinners in action."

"He gets to leave though," Joe laughs.

The friend comments on how nice the house looks. "It's never this clean." His playful comment makes everyone laugh, even the kids. "I'm just kidding."

"When it's all said and done," says Joe, "no matter how much you have, no matter how much you make, family is what matters. Your relationships with your kids."

Sam and Anne Hargis were born on August 24, 1998.

THE MRAZES

Financial affairs were a nonissue for Gail Mraz when it came to affording a large household. Clinic Coordinator at the Dorothy Day Center and a traditional midwife/registered nurse, Gail is also a mother of nine: Melissa, Gina, Greta, Jill, Paul, Jessica, Nick, Jake, and Dolly, ranging from forty to twenty-two years old.

She has been pregnant eleven times, but miscarried twice. Between ages twenty-two and thirty, Gail had six children, and then between ages thirty-four and thirty-nine she had three more.

Growing up, Gail says that she and her two brothers were very good friends. Also, "my father was very loving, we just grew up in that atmosphere. I learned how to live life from my grandmother, and I saw how things work and how happy we were. I decided that was how I was going to do it, too. After my first one was born, I just thought 'I love taking care of children,' having them around me." She decided early on that if she was going to have children she was going to do it the best way she could because "I didn't want to have any regrets. No matter how everybody turned out, I wanted to feel that I had done the best I could with them."

She looked a little perplexed when I told her a lot of people don't have many children because of the lack of cash. "That just never entered my mind," she says. "I thought that we'd find a way to provide for them."

Like my own mother, Gail began having children during the era when women stayed home and had kids. She joined the Catholic Church when she was twenty-two and always looked to God for guidance. She didn't work outside of the home, and cared for the children while her husband went through college. After about seventeen years at home, she went back to college to finish up her nursing degree. Most recently she got her bachelor's degree in women's studies and multicultural studies.

There is warmth, calmness, in Gail's disposition; she radiates tranquility and speaks softly. The charming South Minneapolis home she shares with her second husband is just as serene as she is; it is adorned with many family photos and her affinity for Latin culture is sprinkled throughout the house.

When the children were little, Gail says they did a lot of artwork and made quilts for the beds. "They tell me now that they can laugh at the poverty parts of growing up, where they'd all be sitting around the table, drawing, and the baby would be in the middle [of it]. There were difficult times." Some of those troublesome periods came during winter, especially when it was below zero. "It was very difficult having several little children inside and maybe trying to give the older kids a ride to school. I'd have to bundle them all up, to take them along." But no matter when and how arduous things got, her philosophy was, "the harder things get the more I dig in."

She can recall only one time the entire family went out to dinner, but they always ate supper together. It was the cooking for eleven people every night, the pots and pots of food, providing food at all costs, that she remembers the most. She would get up early in the morning and go to the farmers market to buy mounds of tomatoes to make containers of homemade spaghetti sauce, which she'd freeze (they ate a lot of pasta), and she baked many cookies and bars. She breastfed all her children and actually helped form La Leche League in Minnesota (the first meeting was in 1963 in her home). It became an important dedication and a mode for her to socialize and communicate with other women and families.

Gail acknowledges there were times when



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her children may have envied other kids. Her daughter Jessie had a girlfriend whose father was wealthy, and this girlfriend got new wallpaper in her bedroom. "First of all, the friend had her own bedroom, and there were twin beds in her bedroom so she when she a friend stay over, she'd have her own bed. Anyway, she got some kind of shiny wallpaper and Jessie came home and told me about it and I could tell in her voice [she felt] 'Why can't I have new wallpaper' or lots of other things." Now, when they look back at that time, they get a kick out of it and laugh.

Although she wished she would have been

able to send her children to private schools, Gail and her husband (at the time) exposed the children to "a lot of books because he was teaching at the University of Minnesota and I read a lot, too." So the children were introduced to books, art, languages, and traveling whenever trips were possible.

It didn't appear to Gail that a battle of wills was an overwhelming cause for concern, but she says, "Certainly there were—were—minor irritations. But it doesn't seem like a lot of family feuding. They did a lot of things together in clusters and groups. All of them seemed to be good friends. They played together well. They

were good for each other. They're still good for each other now. They stand up for each other, and blood is thicker than water. The blood between the kids is amazing. If one of them gets in a jam, they're all right there."

She feels that raising children was and is a spiritual as well as a physical and emotional passage: "I can sit back and watch my kids' lives unfold. I think my kids are at peace, too, [concerning the outcome of the family]. They're all doing very well; I'm happy with their lives. There have been hard times but I'm grateful. My life is extremely happy now. I'm at peace. I feel blessed."

THE MILLESSES

Not quite what you'd expect to see, size wise, in today's familial "economic market" is the Milless family. They put the kibosh on the notion of monetary concern. Thirty-seven-year-old Mary Jane Milless is the mother of nine children: Melissa, sixteen, Melinda, fourteen, Mitchell, twelve, Marcus, ten, Matthew, eight, Monica, six, Martin, three, Margaret Mary, two, and Marie, eight months—the "M & M's," as Mary Jane lovingly refers to her family (her husband's name is Mike).

I wasn't sure if I had the right address when I arrived at the Milless's Coon Rapids home. But once I saw Monica, Martin, and Margaret Mary—in her pink fuzzy pajamas—running to the door to make out who the stranger in their driveway was, I knew I had the right place.

It was instinctual for Mary Jane to have a large family; she was raised in one herself (number nine out of ten). Her father's strong belief in family and the desire for having one himself was instilled at an early age. "We were my dad's life. People were the most important thing, life is the most valuable asset you can have and give. I believe if my parents didn't have the attitude they had, I wouldn't be here. Though they didn't have the means [financially], they felt they would take whatever God gave them." Mary Jane's will was strong to become pregnant immediately after getting married, which, of course, she did, "so I've either been pregnant or nursing most of my married life." That would be her entire seventeen years of marriage.

From day one, Mike Milless was quite aware of his wife's longing to have a large family. However, neither of them was prepared to have nine children. Naturally, she says she's gone through moments of thinking, "Oh, I'm pregnant again!" But she has told God that "in a world that rejects life I will take all the babies you want to give me."

The modest split-level home has five bedrooms and three bathrooms, two people per room with the exception of three in the master bedroom (Mary Jane, Mike, and baby Marie). Mary Jane was very polite, attentive, and passionate about the subject at hand, and between offering me coffee and a sandwich, she nursed the baby. I was expecting a lot of commotion during my visit, but the only sight of kids in close range—other than the baby—was when Martin peered through the dining room sliding glass doors, from the outside deck, contorting his face inquisitively against the glass. Mike was on the road, working, and the others were either not at home or outside playing with friends.

A "typical day," if there really is such a thing, consists of packing lunches for the kids, getting them up and fed, getting a load of laundry in, and trying to get the beds made before she goes to church. "Laundry is kind of my central thing." Then she straightens up the house, thinks about what she's going to make for dinner, and bakes cookies for an after-school snack.

They spend about \$350 every two weeks on groceries, and shop at an outlet store for bread (bread and milk are the two items they go through constantly). They buy their fruit and produce at Eisenberg's because she can always get a great deal there, she always breastfeeds, and doesn't spend much on formula (she'll keep a can around, just in case). Also, people are very generous with hand-me-downs and "garage-selling" is done often. "The statistics on raising a large family, financially, aren't necessarily true. I don't think they take bargain shopping into account."

"One thing she would like to do is send



Melissa and Melinda to St. Agnes, the best private Catholic school in the Twin Cities, according to Mary Jane. Because funds are tight, and the drive to and from the school would be an hour and a half, she needed to confer with Mike. He decided that it wasn't viable. Because "I believe in being submissive," Mary Jane did not press the matter.

But what may be more strenuous than the money squeeze is the time crunch. Having dinner together doesn't happen as often as they'd like because the kids are involved in many activities outside the home. "There have been times when we'd have a schedule that would choke a horse," says Mary Jane. "It's either somebody's birthday, somebody's wedding, shower, first communion, baptism, there's always a festive mode." But when it is possible for them to spend time together, they go camping; the whole family enjoys doing that together.

Mary Jane admits there's a lot of work involved in raising her family and sometimes she can "totally go crazy because I'm human. I still like to have things perfect; they'll quickly show you things aren't." But she declares, "there's never a dull moment, so you don't have to search far for entertainment."

With all the effort of bringing up nine children, naturally, there is some tension. How does she deal with the stress? "I call them my 'I can't have anything' fits, when I feel there's nothing

sacred in this whole house. But my truest sense of 'how do I deal with everything' is going to Mass."

You would think there'd have to be moments when the children wish for "only childhood." "They really don't say they don't like it [family size]. I'm sure there are times they may escape it." Melissa will go to a friend's house where there is less activity, "but I don't know if she'd trade places with her friends who come from a smaller family," asserts Mary Jane.

What is most gratifying for Mary Jane is noticing the bonds forming and securing between the kids, watching them huddle together, whispering, not wanting anyone to hear their private sibling conversations. Even though there is obviously always going to be some fighting, "there's the love side, too." Her children are learning to take over some of the household rules, so they grow in different ways. "It teaches them to be less selfish, to learn to take care of their siblings."

When I asked her if she was going to have any more children, she surprised me: "Definitely! When I say I'm totally open, we're totally open. We'll take whatever God gives us. Mike's worked his way up through the ranks. It seems that each time I had a baby, he'd get a promotion or something would happen to show us that we'll be taken care of. Yes, my husband is the provider, but ultimately God is the provider of this family. We've been shown over and over again how God provides. I am totally

"I don't know if my personality would allow me to have as many kids [as my family]. I don't think I have the patience," says Melissa

Milless, far left.

devoted to my family, there is nothing else, but I really don't want anything else either. That [the family] is my goal, that's what I want in life."

Julia L. Ramirez is associate editor of Minnesota Parent. She is pictured below with her family—from left, second from the bottom.

