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Big broods

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Additionally, McCord said, the 1.62 figure was a significant drop from the 2.61 children-per-household average from just 15 years earlier.

Faced with such statistics, families interviewed for this story are well aware that they will raise eyebrows with the general public.

"You do stand out when you walk into church or the mall. You can see people counting," Pat Minchin acknowledged.

"People in church are like, 'Okay, here they come.' And we're always five or 10 minutes late," Phyllis Leszyk remarked. She and her husband, Tom, are the parents of five children — all girls — ages 1 to 12. They belong to Elmira's Eastside Catholic Parish.

However, even though large families are less common these days, Judy Dunlavy said the joys of raising a sizable brood far outweigh the troubles.

"We're really blessed, and we know it," Judy Dunlavy said.

Sacrifices are many

Perhaps these large families make regular appearances in church, but fancy restaurants and exotic vacations are quite another matter.

For the Leszyks, the closest they usually get to restaurant food is when a delivery person shows up at their doorstep.

"Most of the time we order pizza," Tom said.

"A sheet pizza!" his wife added with a laugh.

Similarly, 17-year-old Katie Henrichs said her family goes out for dinner "typically, twice a year."

Katie is the fourth oldest in a family of eight children ages 6 to 24. She is oldest of the five children who still live at home.

In an essay she recently wrote for school, Katie mused, "If I were an only child, it would be different. For one thing, there would be more money floating around, and I wouldn't have to recycle my plastic sandwich bags. We could go on actual vacations, instead of just three days on the New Jersey shore every other year."

Katie's mother, Ginger, said that such cost-cutting measures can be tough for her children to understand.

"They wish we had more money, that we could go on vacations. They've never been on an airplane," Ginger remarked. "They compare themselves to other fami-



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Seated on the couch, left to right, mother Patti Minchin, Susan 13, Kyle, 7 weeks, father Brian and Kevin, 6. Seated on floor, Stacey, 11 and Stephanie, 8.

lies — but there are a lot less kids in those families."

Yet Ginger's husband, Mike, pointed out a staggering statistic that helps justify their tight budget.

"For the next 21 to 23 years, I'll have one to three kids in college at any one time," Mike noted. The Henrichses attend Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Brighton and the University of Rochester's Newman Community.

Along with financial pressures, Mike said, parents of large families face special challenges in making quality time for their children.

"In a big family, the kids have to provide a lot of the attention and camaraderie and love for each other," Mike said.

This is especially true in his household: In addition to Mike maintaining a private psychiatry practice, he and Ginger serve as co-directors of Kids Adjusting Through Support (KATS). The nonprofit outreach provides support for families in which a child's parent has died.

"To be honest, it's probably been about six weeks since I've gotten to my personal mail," Ginger said.

A parent who assumes these high levels of commitment to both children and the community, Mike said, "has got to be a person who's not always 'me, me, me.'" He added that people who are habitually control-oriented, independent, individualistic and neat might not fare well in raising large families.

At times, Katie remarked, she wishes she had received more individual attention from her parents. But as she has grown older, she said she has gained a deeper appreciation for the sacrifices her parents have made.

"I'll stop and think about raising eight

kids, and the whole process of trying to provide a happy home. It's got to be a hard job, and they've got to be doing something right," Katie commented.

What society says

Yet even as far back as 21 years, Mike Henrichs recalled, he and his wife were made to feel they were doing something wrong when they had their third child.

"It was during the time of Zero Population Growth. People would say, 'Gee, that's going over the limit.' That was sort of a hot topic; two parents were supposed to have no more than two children," he remarked.

"Sometimes it was almost a negative comment, not really sharing the joy," Ginger said.

McCord, of the national bishops' conference, noted that decreasing family sizes can be traced to higher use of birth control among Catholics in the last 25 years.

"There have been the natural methods of planning and spacing, to say nothing of the artificial methods," McCord said in a telephone interview from Washington, D.C. "I think there's enough evidence to indicate that Catholics have been using both methods."

Another factor, he added, is the tremendous rise in the number of families in which both parents work.

"Women have higher expectations as a result of having received higher education," he commented. "One of the things that starts dictating smaller families is higher socioeconomic status. Sixty to 70 percent of women with school-aged children have at least part-time work outside the home."

On the other hand, Phyllis Leszyk stays home with her children — with no regrets.

"That's a career in itself," Phyllis said. "I can't think of a more rewarding thing."

She added that going to work may actually be more preferable because "you do get a lunch break there. When I'm home, I'm lucky if I get one. The amount of laundry is unbelievable ... to be a working woman and have a large family would be very, very difficult."

However, Brian Minchin also acknowledged that an at-home mother may simply not be economically feasible for all families.

"It depends on the job. If I made half the amount of money I do, no way could we afford to do this," said Brian, who heads the detective bureau at the City of Elmira Police Department. He has also logged 10 hours per week since 1984 as a

security guard at a local supermarket so that Pat can remain home with the children.

Hectic, but rewarding

Despite all the challenges involved, Joe LaMagna said that he enjoys the excitement of being in a large family.

"It's always been exciting. There's never been a dull moment," Joe said. "By far, it's one of the most fun things you could do. People think we're crazy because we sit around, all laugh and have fun."

Joe joked that he does become slightly annoyed when his oldest sisters come to visit.

"The bathrooms are all taken up. When everyone's home at Christmas, it's impossible," Joe said.

Although Eric Henrichs, 14, said that "somebody's always in a bad mood" at his house, he also noted that "you always have someone to talk to, or play with."

"I say it's fun," agreed Susan Minchin, 13. "Sometimes it's annoying and a little hectic, but you can always talk to someone."

Tim Dunlavy, 15, said he notices the change when family members are not around.

"Even when someone's gone for a few days, it seems a lot emptier and a lot different," Tim remarked.

"You've got to sacrifice a lot. We give up a lot of opportunities to see people, but you get to do things they don't get to do," Jack Dunlavy said. "It's fun to be with the kids."

Fun enough for some of these large families to grow even more? Pat Minchin, 38, and Phyllis Leszyk, 33, acknowledged that this chance still exists.

"You never know what God has planned for you," Pat Minchin said. "When Kyle was born, the kids were like, 'Well, can we have another one?' So we'll have to wait and see what's in store."

"We're not really planning on it, but it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world," Phyllis Leszyk remarked.

And yet, Brian Minchin said, the prospect of large families is basically incomprehensible for several of his acquaintances.

"I have friends who take full vacations to exotic islands, and go two weeks at a time. They don't have any children," Brian said.

"But just walking in and having my kids meet me at the door and say, 'Dad, do you want to play soccer now?' I'd take that any day over the islands," he concluded.

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