

Berks County Extension Home Economist Talks About The Challenge Of The '80's: Balancing Home And Work

BY LOU ANN GOOD

MANHEIM — Mother, columnist, pastor's wife, and extension home economist are a few words that describe Michele Rodgers. Lump them all together and you know, she is one busy woman.

How does she calmly and adequately handle all these responsibilities?

"I'm big on being organized and I'm good at list making," she answers.

Perhaps her research to complete her master's thesis, "Role Strain of Females in Dual Provider Families," enabled her to get a firm grasp on handling stress. Michele said, "The systematic random survey I did for the study opened my eyes to see how fortunate I am."

That means, she has "an exceptional husband who, although not organized, is good at following the lists I make."

Plus she highly values her job as Berks County extension home economist. Those positions are rare and one she probably could not regain if she took a few years off for mothering."

"It's a big decision and a personal one," Michele said of her decision to continue working after the birth of Elise who celebrates her first birthday this week.

"I really miss her while I work," Michele said as she fondly watched Elise playing. "But we have a wonderful child care situation. The woman who watches Elise is wonderful. I see her thriving and I feel good about it. The babysitter stimulates her during the day and although I'm tired when I come home from work, I have enough energy to give her time," she added facetiously, "but not enough time for housework."

Consequently, Michele has a cleaning woman every other week. She admits, "My standards changed. It was hard to give up keeping things spotless, because I had been raised in a family where we scrubbed everything from the attic to the basement." She's trying to find a happy medium.



"I'm never too tired to play with Elise," Michele said. But being a working mom means there are adjustments and inconveniences. "I miss sewing," Michele said as she finds it too frustrating with an inquisitive one-year-old.

Basically Michele and her husband Steve follow task sharing, which means they each take responsibility to do the chores they enjoy and do well. Michele said her experience and the survey show, "The greater the task sharing the less strain."

Presently, Michele is developing workshops that will focus on balancing work and family, management and time sharing. She has several workshops tentatively scheduled for the fall at a bank that will pay their employees to take the class. She said, "Many employers are willing to work along with their employees because they know such classes benefit the work environment. The old-fashioned theory that employees forget their families when they enter the workplace simply is not true," Michele stressed. "Employers recognize that fallacy and want to help enable their people to do a better job."

In keeping with the theme of balancing work and family responsibilities, Michele has also written leaflets to be inserted in employees paychecks.

Since the early '80s, Michele has been writing the "Back Home" column that appears biweekly in this paper. Last year, she temporarily stopped it while she completed her master's degree at Penn State

University. Michele recalls that those hectic months were no picnic. For three semesters, she commuted weekly between her Manheim home and the University campus. She joked, "Weekly, my sister made dinner for my husband so that he would not become malnourished."

Besides adapting to graduate school, unexpectedly but happily, Michele became pregnant last November. Elise was born in August. Michele completed her thesis in December. "She's go to be a very bright baby after all that," Michele joked. Three months later, Michele returned to Berks County as the extension home economist to pay back her sabbatical leave. And she resumed writing her "Back Home" column that has won two national awards from the extension service.

Always supportive, Steve encourages other men to do things with their children. "Don't be afraid to do things like changing diapers," he said. He believes babies add so much to life. He said, "Michele and I laughed more in this past year than in the past eight all put together."

Concerning housework, he admits, "I still don't dust." His

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Steve and Michele Rodgers declare that Elise has made them laugh more in the last year than in the past eight years together. Elise is a happy, gregarious child who, Michele believes, thrives on interaction with both her parents and her babysitter.

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