

Patton Leaves Extension To Become Full-Time 'Mr. Mom'

LOU ANN GOOD

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MACUNGIE (Berks Co.) —
"What women have been doing for thousands of years, I've just discovered," Jeff Patton said as he juggled 15-month-old Christiane on his hip while pausing to admire a stone found by 5-year-old Lee. Patton recently resigned from his job as multicounty extension agent to become a full-time "Mr. Mom."

Better make that dad, although what Patton does is traditionally considered full-time mommy duty.

Patton did not quit his career so he could get some remodeling projects finished around the house.

He said, "My reason was to devote time to the children."

Before the switch, Patton and his wife Carol, a physician, felt the suffocating vise of tight scheduling.

"We were always rushing — always tired," Carol said of the couple's previous hassle with trying to be both perfect parents and career professionals.

Before parenthood, the Pattons had every intention of combining full-time careers with parenting. After the birth of their first child, they had little difficulty settling into a routine of dropping off Lee for child care and working full time. Also, Carol's parents were available for babysitting several days weekly.

But when Chrissy was born, the workload increased and now it was double the things that could go wrong.

"It was too stressful with both of us working full-time," Carol said. "I no longer felt, 'yes I can do this.'"

Instead, reality kept reminding her, "No, I can't do it all. I am not

super mom."

The parents felt guilty awakening the children and rushing them through breakfast, then dropping them off at daycare so they could get to work in time.

"Our children are not morning people. It seems unfair to rush them through breakfast and dressing before they are schoolage." Breakfast for the parents often turned out to be a bagel or pop tart eaten in the car."

Another taxing problem was that Chrissy would often awaken three times during the night and take only a one hour nap during the day.

At work, the demands of synchronizing childcare, household duties, and day-to-day responsibilities were always on their mind. "Who was able to pick up the children that day? What needed to be picked up at the grocery store?"

The parents recalled their own relatively free childhood when a different era was in effect. Carol's mother, a secretary, was required to stop working as soon as her pregnancy showed.

They remembered carefree summertime schedules, with no set time for getting up and rushing off to baby sitters, no set schedules — just time to enjoy being a child.

Patton said, "With both of us working, we thought that our children would never know summer as a time free to be a child. And, yet, we wanted to let our kids be kids without a lot of early structure in learning."

Patton, who grew up in Ohio, described himself as a suburban kid who wanted to get into agriculture. He worked on farms, for the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, the Pa. Dept. of Ag in market development, and as an agricultural rep-



Without the panic of rushing from one place to another, the Pattons have discovered how much fun family togetherness can be. Carol works as a doctor while Jeff resigned from his job as Penn State extension agent to provide full-time care for Lee, 5, and Christiane, 15 months.

resentative for PP&L before becoming the multicounty marketing agent for Northampton, Lehigh, Berks, Montgomery, and Bucks counties.

"I loved my job — it wasn't that I was dissatisfied with it that influenced my decision to give it up," Patton said. "I told my boss that my top three reasons for leaving were Carol, Lee, and Chrissy."

"My pivotal point (in deciding to become a stay-at-home parent) was when I was at a meeting with

colleagues Penn State," Patton said. The discussion centered on families and each one agreed that it was best for children to have a full-time parent at home."

It struck Patton as ironic he and Carol believed that a stay-at-home parent provided a more positive environment for a child, but didn't provide that.

"Parents and children deserve each other (time together)," he said.

Carol and he agreed that "children are more important than a career." Nonetheless, a breadwinner is also needed in the family.

After months of deliberation, the Pattons decided that it would work best if he were the one to quit his job to concentrate on full-time parenting.

"There is no longer this constant panic of hurry, hurry, hurry," Carol said. "No more mad dashes to pick up something for supper at the supermarket."

And, most important of all, is the atmosphere created that allows parents and children to enjoy each other. Lots of laughing, touching, and joy permeates throughout the family.

Both husband and wife emphatically agree that it's the best decision they made.

Although Patton is shocked to discover how hard he can work all day with very little tangible evidence to show for it, he said, "I wouldn't trade my situation."

Carol doesn't put pressure on him to do chores around the house or to have dinner made. She said, "It has taken tremendous pressure off of me by knowing Jeff is with the children. I know it's in the children's best interest. Some days if Jeff gets one load of laundry done, it is an accomplishment. I consider getting anything done around the house is an extra bonus."

On his first day home, Patton was quite pleased with his accomplishments.

He said, "By 9:15 a.m., I had ironed two shirts and one pair of pants."

But his industrious pace was interrupted when, one hour later, a

bee stung Chrissy and her arm was swelling.

He called his doctor-wife for advice and dropped all work-related projects to concentrate on Chrissy's care. Four weeks later, Patton admitted, "I haven't ironed since."

The weeks have been a training ground in learning to become more efficient in parenting skills.

"I learned to start the day with Kleenex in my pocket," Patton said as he made a quick swipe for Chrissy, who foresaw the dreaded white hankie and made a squirmy getaway.

Patton has also learned to do housework in snatches. "Sometimes I'm only to sweep under half the bed before dropping it for childcare," he said.

The Pattons are grateful to have the choice of having a parent be able to stay at home.

"I'm sure that nine out of 10 fathers love their children as much as I do, but only one in 10 have a situation that allows them to stay at home," Patton said.

According to a recent Knight Ridder Newspaper article, stay-at-home fathers are declining as the economy picks up. In 1991, about 20 percent considered themselves stay-at-home fathers. That figure dropped to 16 percent in 1993.

Some of those figures reflect dads being stay-at-home fathers because they were laid off their jobs and were unable to get another one.

For Patton, it is a choice — not something he is doing because he doesn't have other options.

Nonetheless, the change hasn't been without sacrifice. After a long-term leave of absence, will he be able to re-enter the career field or will his skills be obsolete?

Also, he was eligible to take a sabbatical to earn a master's degree and have the opportunity for extension work in a foreign settings, something he had always wanted.

"Of course, one hears so much about the importance of saving for the future, of starting a child's college fund now," Patton said.

But the Pattons decided it was

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HOMESTEAD NOTES



"Men," Patton jokes, "always want to be recognized for accomplishments that women take for granted." After he became a stay-at-home father and the primary care provider for the children, it took him three weeks to finish washing this window in between child-care responsibilities. He conned his wife into pinning a medal on him for, what he considers, a notable accomplishment.