

Press-Telegram (Long Beach, CA)

August 2, 1992

THE FULL-NEST SYNDROME

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Josie Chartier has had it. Never in her wildest, most tortured dreams did she imagine she'd be a 55-year-old grandmother of four with three adult children still living at home.

"I have no sense of humor anymore," she deadpans. "We're still going to the Price Club to buy 40 pounds of laundry detergent. We can't even carry it. We're too old."

Josie and her husband, Len, most definitely are not old. They are attractive, high-spirited people who have loved raising their brood in their comfortable, four bedroom - plus dormitory - east Long Beach home. It's just that, well, by now they kind of assumed they'd have the house to themselves.

They are hardly the only middle-aged parents who are wondering when - or if - the familial nest will ever empty. Earlier this month, the Census Bureau published the results of a 1991 survey showing that more than 30 percent - almost one in three - of single adults between the ages of 25 and 29 are living with Mom and Dad.

Some have never left. Others left and returned.

By the time unmarried adults have celebrated their 30th birthdays, and until they are 34, almost one in four still lives with their parents. Even between the ages of 35 and 39, the numbers of adult children living with parents is still a sizable 16 percent, according to the census data.

In keeping with demographic trends of recent years, the survey also found that men and women continue to marry later. The median age for men to marry has risen from 22.6 in 1955 to 26.3 in 1991. For women, the median age for a first marriage is 24.1, up from 20.2 in 1955, the survey found.

Although there are different social and cultural reasons for the increasing numbers of adult children living with their parents for longer periods of time, the depressed economy and high divorce rates are common themes.

The Chartier family has been affected by both. Following a divorce two years ago, David, their 25-year-old son, moved back in. Months later, son Michael, who is 28, rejoined the family. Michael had left home for three years to attend St. John's Catholic seminary in Camarillo. When he decided the priesthood wasn't for him, he was broke and needed a place to regroup.

The regrouping has lasted well over a year.

"I'm definitely not where I thought I'd be by now," says Michael, who recently landed a job at McDonnell Douglas. "I thought I'd be settled. I don't want to rely on Mom and Dad. But I'm starting out from scratch and the economy is very sour."

Michael, who was unemployed for three months in the past year, says he's well aware that his and his brother's financial dependence is creating a family dynamic that is far from ideal. He is engaged to be married sometime next spring, and says he hopes to get a teaching job and move into his own place in September.

Josie says she'll believe it when she sees it.

"They love this house," she says in a tone bleached of humor.

Now that he's pushing 30, Michael says it's difficult to live at home. "I'm used to living by my own rules," he says. "It's not that my parents give me rules, but it's just different in their house. I'd like to entertain, for example. But my friends are a lot older than my youngest brother. He's got this big dormitory upstairs by my room. He plays the drums. He's in a band. ..."

Josie can't believe what she's hearing. "That's never stopped you from entertaining before," she interjects, adding that Michael's fiancée typically shows up Friday night and stays for the entire weekend.

Then there's Michael's friend, David, Len offers with a playful grin. "He's 6-foot-7 5/8 and he has a GREAT appetite."

Everybody laughs. The tension momentarily lifts.

"I can't afford to keep all these people," Josie finally says, shaking her head in frustration. "We're spending \$1,400 a month on food and utilities. If it were just Len and me, it would cost \$300."

"We don't need this. We want to retire. I want quiet. I want to be able to bring our friends over without worrying about what we're going to come home to. I'd love to leave the house, go away, come back and find it exactly the way I left it. No ketchup on the carpet. No dishes in the sink."

One moment, Josie is a tough talker who insists she wholeheartedly agrees with one of her daughters who advises, "Boot them out! JUST BOOT THEM OUT!"

The next she is a frank, funny mom who makes it clear that despite the imperfections of the family's current makeup, she's rooting for her kids all the way. She knows the job market is tough. She knows raising

a family today is far more complex than it was when she and Len set out for California from Massachusetts 30 years ago with three little kids, an old car, \$1,400 and intact hopes.

"No one loves their children more than I do," she says without sounding the least bit false or goofy.

Extended families

Other than the years he was separated from his parents during the time of the killing fields in Cambodia in the late '70s, and later in the Thai refugee camps, Chan Virak Hou always has lived as a member of an extended family.

Now 30, he is the undisputed patriarch of a clan that now includes his mother and two younger brothers. His father frequently visits the family's attractive rental house near 10th Street and Coronado Avenue, but has lived with Hou's sister since he and his wife separated a few years ago.

Hou is clearly pained by his parents' separation. "I want them back together," he says firmly.

For most of the years since immigrating to the United States in 1980, Hou has worked, attended classes at Long Beach City College and taken almost complete responsibility for running the household and rearing his siblings.

Currently, he works as a vocational adviser at the United Cambodian Community, and frequently has juggled two jobs. Since his mother's English is poor, he is the one who helps his brothers with their homework and attends meetings at their school. They are 13 and 18. Both are straight-A students. In June, Sithi Hou graduated from Lakewood High School with honors and received a full scholarship to UCLA.

"I play a big role in the family," says Hou, who is planning to get married Oct. 17. "My mother doesn't want me to move out. She wants me to stay here and save and prepare for my own family."

Like many families in the Cambodian community, the Hous pool their resources. They are culturally accustomed to living as members of extended, rather than nuclear, families.

Hou estimates, however, that more than half of the Cambodian refugees now living in Long Beach have abandoned the tradition of living with the bride or groom's family after a wedding.

Referring to his own postnuptial plans, he says, "Both of our families want us. To be fair, we'll probably live in an apartment, just the two of us. We want to be alone, and we want to be fair. Later on, it will depend on how my fiancée feels - if she is willing to live with our parents or not.

"I have to take both sides."

Hou says there are plenty of Cambodians in their late 20s and 30s who still live at home and share in the responsibilities of supporting their families. He is, however, disturbed by the number who act "outrageously."

"They don't care about family. They aren't mature. They don't listen to their parents," Hou says.

"Their parents don't speak English. They are in culture shock. The children live at home and take advantage. Sometimes they stay forever."

A 'natural' arrangement

Staying forever is not what Lydia Flores has in mind. But then living with her parents at age 31 wasn't on her agenda 10 years ago either.

Flores, a pretty, petite young woman who works as an IV technician at Long Beach Memorial Hospital, moved out of her parent's home four days after her 21st birthday.

She shared an apartment with a girlfriend and four cats. When the friend got married four years later, she couldn't figure out how she was going to pay the rent and make the car insurance payment, too. More important, living alone didn't appeal to her in the least.

"I'm kind of a homebody," she says. "And I have great parents."

Her father, the Rev. Ladislao Flores, pastor of Iglesia Metodista Unida, says having Lydia live at home for the past six years has been the most natural thing in the world.

Six months ago, his son, Ladislao Jr., who is 32, also moved back in. He works as the manager of an automotive store and simply could never get financially ahead.

"We all help pitch in for the soap and supplies and the food we buy," the Rev. Flores says. "My wife and I are of Mexican descent. We believe families belong together.

"You have to pay a price for independence," he adds. "Sometimes the price is higher than you imagine."

Lydia says she plans to go to law school in the near future and one day would like to buy a place of her own. Neither prospect would be even a remote possibility if she were spending every cent she makes on the bare necessities.

"But these are my childbearing years," she offers. "By living at home, I am learning the value of family. I really, really want one boy and one girl. A baby is more important to me than graduate school. Law school will always be there."

Is she going out with anyone special?

"No. I have no boyfriend," she says.

Much as she wants her own house and family someday, Lydia insists her parents never irritate her. The feeling apparently is mutual.

“We have absolutely no hesitation about having our children live at home,” says her mother, Naomi. “We always said we’re available if they ever needed help. What I most want for Lydia is that she find fulfillment in her career and also in raising her own family. It is important for children to develop themselves, and to value the closeness of family ties.”

It’s been a great many years since she expected Lydia to make her own bed. Lydia is an adult, after all. Still, some parental instincts never change, no matter how old the offspring. When the subject of Lydia’s room comes up, her mother and father laugh a little nervously. They weren’t expecting visitors today, and, well, frankly Lydia isn’t the neatest person in the world.

In fact, Lydia hasn’t made her bed yet today and her bedroom is cluttered. She says she’ll probably get around to straightening it up one of these days. She doesn’t need any reminders from Mom and Dad.

After all, she’s an adult.