

Style Plus

Focus

National Checkup
Americans' Visions of Their Family ValuesBy Don Oldenburg
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O nce when David Nelson took time off from the "The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet" to tour with a trapeze act, an interviewer asked him about the TV show's secret of success. The popular sitcom, which starred the real-life Nelson family and featured the antics of brothers David and Ricky, aired 435 episodes of wholesome suburban ambience from 1952 to 1966.

Then as now, Nelson credited his father, the stammering yet understanding Ozzie Nelson, who maintained total creative control over the show. "I said that he actually had a sense of the pulse of middle America," Nelson recalls. "That those were all his values."

Back from the Big Top, Nelson mentioned what he said to his father. "Thank you very much, but that's not true," he remembers Ozzie telling him. "I just do the things that I think are funny. . . . You've got to go with what's in your own gut. Otherwise you'll never know your true values."

At a time when national politicians are sounding a national debate over values and Americans are pondering the financial and social pressures that besiege today's family, the words "Ozzie and Harriet" are being evoked frequently, with yearning by some, ridicule by others, to mean a simpler, easier and safer era.

Though Ozzie's job in the show never was clearly defined, he and a smiling Harriet always were waiting for the boys to come home from school in that modest living room overlooking Sycamore Road, a large brass eagle adorning the fireplace mantel. Only television, of course. But nonetheless light years away from the TV image of Murphy Brown holding her newborn, alone, lullabying him with "You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman."

Or is it so different?

"There was a lot of truth in the 'Ozzie and Harriet' show," says David Nelson, 56, now a grandfather and president of Casablanca Productions in Hollywood. "It comes from one thing [Ozzie] instilled, which was a basic sense of caring."

Ozzie Nelson's background mostly set the family standards—on screen and off. He grew up in a small New Jersey town and was an Eagle Scout. He worked his way through college and law school as a band leader, was captain of the debating team, played varsity football, married the band's vocalist, sent his brother through dental school. He died of cancer in 1975 but never drank or smoked.

"He got his values from his parents and then passed them on to us," says Nelson, who used to collect "Ozzieisms," such as: "There are no freedoms without boundaries." Wrapped in those bromides were Ozzie's lessons to his sons about work ethics, responsibility, fairness.

"There were certain things he felt strongly about—all of them implied in the Boy Scout motto," Nelson says.

"He cared about what we were doing. He was on top of it as far as our homework and who our friends were." When Ricky started playing rock-and-roll as a teenager, Ozzie ignored some public opinion that considered the new music to be a disgrace, even destructive to society, and instead encouraged his youngest son, insisting he sing each week on the show for exposure.

"I have tried with my children to do the same thing," says David Nelson. "But it seems increasingly difficult nowadays. . . . I can only do the best I can. It is a different time and a different place than the 'Ozzie and Harriet' show."

The Quayle Definition

"Good family values, parental involvement, personal responsibility, integrity, hard work, self-dignity, teaching children what is right and wrong [and] telling people that there is in some cases not a gray area, that there is a difference," is how Vice President Dan Quayle defined family values on "The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour" recently.

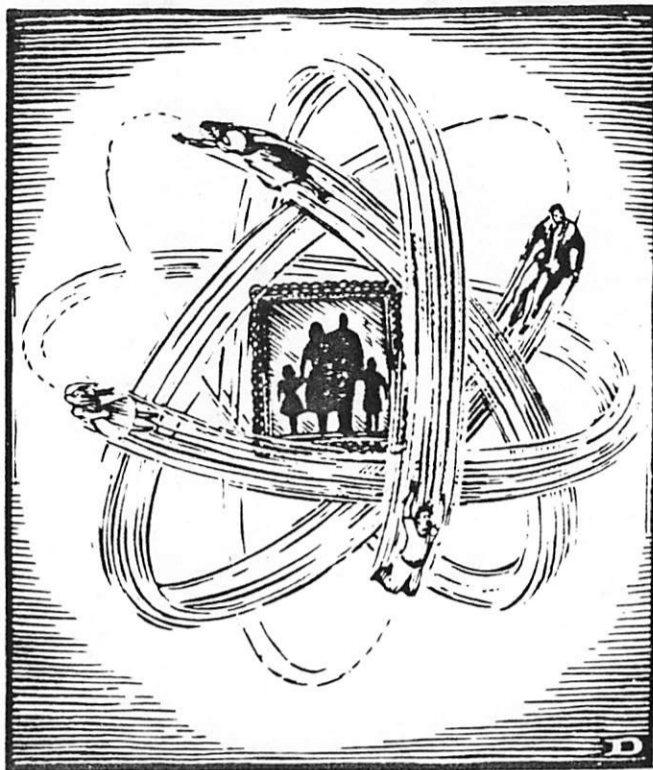
In other statements, Quayle has implied marital and sexual standards as well. He criticized TV character Murphy Brown for setting a bad example by having a child out of wedlock. He has blamed "lawless social anarchy," namely the riots in Los Angeles, on "the breakdown of family structure, personal responsibility and social order." He has positioned "the simple but hard virtues" as an us-versus-them issue. Targeting the enemy as indulgence and self-gratification, he has called marriage with children the "preferred option" to single-parent families and homosexual relationships. He has said "bearing babies irresponsibly is wrong," and has heralded honesty, fidelity and integrity.

Savoring Quayle's election-year rhetoric is Gary Bauer, president of the Family Research Council, a District-based conservative think tank and lobbying group. Bauer says he believes Quayle is barely scratching the surface of a veritable "civil war" over eroding values that is at the core of our national discontent.

"Those things still get anywhere from 85 to 95 percent of confirmation among the American people as being what we ought to strive for," says Bauer, whose book "Our Journey Home," about recapturing traditional values, is scheduled for publication in September.

"You get a ready agreement on the concept, but as soon as you take it to the next step and suggest the culture has a responsibility here, or say virtue is important and thus we shouldn't be giving our kids condoms, then you get a big, hot, nasty debate. My side would argue that you can't be serious about virtue if in the same breath you are talking to children about how to make sodomy a healthful practice."

Bauer admits the behavior and reputation of some politicians make them unlikely messengers for honesty, fidelity and integrity. But . . . "Whether politicians want to or not, the '90s are going to be the decade in which Amer-



BY BOB DABBS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

ica finally does have a good debate about family life, about values, and about what we hope our country looks like going into the next century."

Public Opinions

"I'm stumped," Barbara Fishbaugh says. "What are family values?"

That's the initial reaction. Perhaps it's the personal nature of the issue, but pedestrians asked about their family values tend to shrug shoulders and look perplexed. But they really do know—all of them.

"Family values is being true to your family," speaks up Larry Fishbaugh, Barbara's husband. The upper New York state couple relaxed in the shade outside the White House grounds with their son on their first day in the nation's capital. He's a Kodak supervisor; she's self-employed, and their son is in grade school.

"We sure don't need Dan Quayle to tell us what they are," says Larry Fishbaugh. His wife nods in agreement. Neither likes the idea of politicians raising the banner of values.

"Dan Quayle's suggesting that there's a certain way it has to be for families," she says. "Like one parent at home with the kids. But all families can't be that way. And they can still have as many good values as any family. It's easy for Dan Quayle to say."

Nearby, along Pennsylvania Avenue, Steve and Marianne Underhill consult a sightseeing map. They drove from Indianapolis with two youngsters and their grandmother from Chicago, Marilyn Hielscher. They parked illegally this morning and are worried about getting a ticket. They're surprised at how friendly people here are. "Not like New York City," they all agree.

Family values? "Keeping the family together," says Steve Underhill, a CPA who thinks parents need to spend more time with their children. He's been a Cub Scout master and coaches his son's junior-high football team; Marianne Underhill is a part-time medical technologist and a Girl Scout leader. "Integrity, honesty, respect for other people and for yourself. A strong sense of community and service. And it's important to know the history of your family and understand the continuity of it. To me, those are Midwestern values."

But the Underhills concede it's harder today to teach family values. "There's more questioning now," he says. "More available to them, more thrown at them. Our kids go to private Catholic schools where we know the teachers aren't afraid to stand in front of the class."

Alan and Nancy Hecker are pushing two of their children in strollers and a third walks alongside them on 15th Street NW. Family values have been on their minds lately. So much so that they've "made a major lifestyle change," he says. He recently quit his job in Manhattan's financial district, and they sold their New Jersey home and are moving to Boca Raton, Fla., close to the grandparents.

"The moving van is packing us as we speak," says Alan Hecker, who doesn't have a job in Florida yet. "We're too caught up in working, in making money and trying to get ahead. I realized that in 13 years in New York, I'd never been to the Statue of Liberty with my children. We've never gone for a bicycle ride, the five of us together. I don't want to spend two hours each way commuting on a train anymore."

Says Nancy Hecker: "We don't want to wake up 15 years from now and think, 'What a pity.' Nobody on their death bed wishes they'd spent more time working and less time with their families."

The children are eager to go: More sightseeing before driving to Florida. "All of our friends are discussing the same thing," says Alan Hecker. "Everyone made fun of Dan Quayle for talking about family values, but he's right on the money."

Reality Check

U.S. Census figures indicate an appropriate '90s sequel to "Ozzie and Harriet" would be "The Adventures of Harriet." The number of single-parent households has doubled since 1970, from 12 to 25 percent—including some 10 million single mothers. One-fifth of all unwed white mothers were never married; half of all unwed black mothers were never married.

"There are two sides to anyone laying out family values," says Jan Dizard, professor of anthropology and

sociology at Amherst College and co-author of the 1990 book "The Minimal Family," a study of the contemporary American family and its origins.

"There's a positive assertion of certain presumptions about how children are best raised and how community is best held together . . . the assertion that a stable family has a husband and wife who fashion some kind of minimally respectable and socially responsible family unit that makes minimum demands on the community.

"How many people actually live life that way? It turns out not that many. . . . You start pulling back the covers, and beneath that veneer you find all kinds of complicated stuff. First of all, mothers are no longer home because they are out working. The family can no longer be sustained on the income of one breadwinner."

The negative side of lecturing on traditional values, says Dizard, is the risk of reproaching or excluding people in our society who for one reason or another are not measuring up. "They tend to be of darker hue, many of them are more recent arrivals on our shores, and they presumably don't have those same values," he says.

But, as is often the case with nostalgia, says Dizard, the good old days weren't always as good as we remember. "It was an era when choices were fewer and simpler. . . . It's easy to forget the mentally retarded and the handicapped who were kept home, and the squashed lives from the petty tyrannical father, when all you remember is how we all got together on the Fourth of July."

In interviewing families for his research, Dizard has found that the values debate "strikes a resonant chord" nationally. "What is interesting is that people whose values have changed the most are ambivalent about it," he says. "You'll find people saying that while their family is managing all right, others are messing up. Even among people whose lives are fully committed to a new version of the family—both spouses working, kids being independent and autonomous in day care—they may think they're doing a good job, but they think there is a problem in society with others doing the same thing."

Current Trends

Since 1988, MassMutual Life Insurance Co. has conducted one of the most comprehensive ongoing investigations of the values around which American families shape their lives. It has explored, among other things, what family values are, what children think of the family, Americans' views on fatherhood, and how values are changing. The program's stated purpose: "to encourage awareness of the family as a vital national resource that should be nurtured, protected and preserved."

Based on nationwide focus groups and extensive telephone surveys, MassMutual's 1991 follow-up study to its original 1989 survey identified the following trends:

- Commitment to their highest-held family values has increased: Americans who said "respecting one's parents" is one of the most important values increased by 9 percent to 47 percent. "Respecting one's child" jumped 9 percent to 43 percent overall.

- Two-thirds of respondents say they are "very" or "extremely" satisfied with their own family life while 57 percent say the family life of Americans in general is fair or poor.

- Thirty-eight percent of parents of

teenagers said the most important thing they did to develop their children's values was to set a good example in daily life. Twenty-three percent mentioned as important "teaching children the difference between right and wrong" and 15 percent said "reasoning with children and explaining why they hold the values they hold." Only 10 percent said "making and enforcing consistent rules."

- Thirty-six percent said they spent "too little" time together as a family; more than half of which blamed "having to spend time working in order to earn enough money to support myself and my family."

- Pessimism about the decline of family values is increasing (65 percent overall), especially among women, older respondents, and Americans of African or Hispanic descent.

"It was clear from the '91 survey that the American people seem to really understand that the family is the place where kids learn values, where they learn to be with other people, and that they want that responsibility and they cherish it," says Rebecca Shanok, a New York psychologist specializing in family and childhood issues who consulted to MassMutual on its family values program.

"But people are struggling like crazy, and if the politicians want something to rant and rave about, it should be how to make the workplace and the needs of raising a family more congruent with each other."

Shanok says the survey identifies another daily battle families face. "The American people are constantly being lured into thinking that they need things in order to be happy," she says. "It means they are living in the world where their own internal value system is not validated by their own society and that takes a tremendous toll on family life. But I think people are beginning to see through that a little bit. I found the surveys to be heartening."

The Great Debate

"Family values are how we live and what we believe regarding sexuality, marriage and parenthood," says David Blankenhorn, president of the Institute for American Values, a nonpartisan think tank in New York concerned with family issues. "Historically those three areas have been intimately linked. Sex occurred inside of marriage largely for the purpose of procreation. Now those three areas have been separated; they are less dependent on each other. That's what we're having a big cultural argument over."

But Blankenhorn contends the great debate is all but over. "Five years ago the debate was much more whether the family is getting weaker or is simply changing. That has quieted down," he says. "There has been an expanding agreement across political lines that, as an institution, family is getting weaker and child well-being has declined. There has even been a shift in the elite opinion, in the scholarly world, in the policy world and in the media, toward a sense that we genuinely have an enormous problem on our hands."

"It's not a debate about conditions anymore; it's a debate about causes and cures. It's about what we are prepared to give up in order to fix it. As imperfect as it may be to have politicians and fictional TV characters become our Rorschach test on this, we are actually debating something that is profoundly important. This taps into the most profound happinesses and sorrows in our lives."