



Newlywed bliss *meets* budgeting woes

by Kathleen M. Basi

Before CCL members John and Lisa Neilsen got married, a priest told them every engaged person should save \$60,000.

It sounded ludicrous. How could anyone possibly save such an astronomical amount?

But after their wedding in April 2010, the Neilsens came to view that advice in a different light. Like many newlyweds, they had two incomes and hefty student loans. But unlike many, they conceived their first child on their wedding night.

The Neilsens had always intended Lisa to stay home, but it simply wasn't feasible so soon into their marriage. In Orange County, Calif., where all their family and friends live, the median house price is eight times the median income.

"Based off where we were living, what we were spending, what we were making, I knew it wasn't possible," John said.

After their son Marcus was born, Lisa had six months' maternity leave, five of which were paid. But after that, something had to change. If they really wanted Lisa car-



Photos by John Pascale, This Moment Captured

ing for Marcus, expenses had to be cut drastically. And so they chose to move in with John's parents.

With built-in child care and no housing costs, the Neilsens were able to start saving for a house. Soon after, Lisa found a part-time work-at-home opportunity in her field. Now they live below their means and save every penny toward a down payment on a home of their own.

The early pregnancy forced them to alter their newlywed vision, seizing an option that not every newlywed couple has, John acknowledged. "We're fortunate that our parents were willing to open their doors to help us save," he said, adding that they expect the arrangement to last less than a year.

Candidate Teaching Couple Mark and Chelle Smith-Vandergriff, of Jefferson City, Mo., started their marriage in a somewhat different place: they already had a child.

The couple met at Benedictine College, where they both studied theology. Young and unprepared for the intensity of their feelings, they gave into temptation and found themselves facing an out-of-wedlock pregnancy.

Afterward, many people tried to convince them that the pill was “the logical thing” for them, Mark said. “Even though we had made mistakes, we didn’t want to add even more of them to our relationship.”

They had to get back onto the right track spiritually and physically — and on a practical level, the pregnancy brought tremendous financial instability. “Because we were young, because we’d never really had financial responsibility, we had no type of saving plan or budget,” Chelle said.

With student loans, part-time jobs, and a child on the way, they had to rethink everything. By the time the college students were married, they had a matter-of-fact response to that ever popular question: “Where are you honeymooning?”

“We weren’t!” said Mark. “We were going back to work!”

ONE

**in 3 couples
cite finances as a
major problem
in their marriage.**

Source: Mint.com

It was time to defend different priorities, Chelle said. “Are we putting food on the table? Are we still in college? Are we being good parents, are we tucking our child in at night? Those were our necessities. The rest was: Can we afford this? If not, moving on!”

Lisa Neilsen agrees. “The beauty is that everything in our lives is focused on us as a family,” she said. “We have no time to think of ourselves as individuals anymore. Every decision is about the greater whole. We have to think about how our decisions today will affect us in the future.”

Newlywed insights

Not all NFPers have a baby right away, but chances are they will face those challenges sooner than their contraceptive peers, because let’s face it: being open to life often means more children, sooner.

“I want to have as many kids as we’re supposed to have,” said John Neilsen. “However many God intends.”

At the same time, he and Lisa have to be realistic, which means taking finances into consideration. “Right now, I know we’re going to wait until we’re out on our own.”

That said, the twenty-something dad doesn’t believe the decision to avoid pregnancy should be just a financial one. “If it was based purely on finances, no one would ever have another child.”

NFP-using newlyweds quickly learn that planning a family and planning finances are two facets of the same jewel.

“Our whole sexuality from day one is about self-control and discipline in your life,” Lisa said. “All the virtues cross over. Sharing everything you have and being one — it’s the same in finances and in NFP. We have to be open to each other in terms of our goals, being disciplined in what we buy, and being mutually involved in decisions.”

Mutual decision-making was especially critical for the Smith-Vandergriffs, who faced a choice: embrace family life, with all that that implies, or follow the prevailing culture. One of their professors, a CCL instructor, approached them about learning NFP. It was the beginning of a major redirection in their lives.

Eight years, one wedding and four children later the Smith-Vandergriffs see many points of overlap between their financial and family planning decisions. “There have been times I’d say I want a baby,” Chelle recalled, “and Mark would say, ‘Maybe this isn’t the right time’ — and there’s times when he’s wanted a baby, and I go, ‘Euh, best timing?’ We do that with finances too.”

CCL members Holly and Steve Day, who were married in 1990, point out that there is no “yours” and “mine” in marriage.

“Steve had a car payment and I had school loans at the beginning of our marriage,” said Holly. “We saw these as ‘our’ loans. There just isn’t room for selfishness if the marriage is to succeed. The same holds true for using NFP.”

This is even more true now that they have eight children ranging from 17 to infancy, Holly added. “We have to manage where every penny is going.”

Making it work

NFPers already have a leg up on good financial management: they’re used to working as a team. Finances are just one more area in which couples grow together. “Two

months after our wedding, we didn't have enough money to eat after we paid our bills," Holly said. "I had a job, but I hadn't received my first paycheck. Looking back, we agree that we didn't do so well at planning ahead...something we work a lot more at now."

Here's some advice for engaged couples from the trenches:

Start early. Don't wait to make plans until after the wedding — or even when you decide to get married. "When I was in college, I wanted to make sure the industry I went into paid well so I could at least have the opportunity to raise my family on one income," said John Neilsen. "Before we got married, we continued to live at home to save money."

Live below your means. "The smartest thing is to not only live below your means when you're married

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Financial discernment Candidate Teaching Couple Mark and Chelle Smith-Vandergriff, both 27, of Jefferson City, Mo., are also parents. Here they share what need-versus-want looks like in their marriage.

Mark's wants

- 1 Material things for kids to make them happy
- 2 Dad toys and entertainment
- 3 Lunch when and where I want
- 4 Major home improvements, remodels, and updates
- 5 Time for trips with family

Mark's needs

- 1 Planning long-term instead of living month to month
- 2 Time alone with Chelle, away from kids
- 3 Discussion about all expenses and purchases
- 4 Planning, including research reviews and price comparisons, on all purchases
- 5 Income growth plan, career development opportunities, certification and education classes

Chelle's wants

- 1 Eating out, specialty foods, and branded character snack foods (Go-Gurt, Dora snacks and Sponge Bob cereal)
- 2 Trendy clothes, shoes and toys
- 3 A large, immaculate house with new home furnishings
- 4 Family vacations
- 5 Expensive gifts and surprises on special occasions

Chelle's needs

- 1 Praying together and sharing family meals
- 2 Clean clothing, fresh air, and hobbies
- 3 A safe and loving home
- 4 Quality time and conversation with each member of the family
- 5 Traditions, family, and friends

Planning to live on one income

No matter how career oriented you are, the desire to stay home can sneak up on you after the birth of a child. But unless you've planned for it, you may not have the option.

For nine months before Lisa and John Neilsens' first child was born, the CCL members saved, hoping to make it possible for her to quit working. But his early, blessed arrival — they conceived on their wedding night — made it harder to swing.

"The financial strain didn't really sink in until Marcus was born," Lisa said. "I begged and pleaded with my husband not to make me go back to work. I lived in dread of it."

The Neilsens found an alternate solution: They moved in with parents. "This is our sacrifice," Lisa said, "giving up the comfort and privacy of our own home in order to make a better future for our family."

CCL Member Nathan Braun has seen the new financial reality overwhelm many acquaintances. "Daycare in Madison [Wis.] is \$300 a week for a newborn," said the CCL member. "If the second spouse is only making \$400 to 500 a week gross, they're lucky to be breaking even."

Not every woman thinks she is made to stay home, notes Nathan's wife, Theresa, but you don't know for sure until after the child arrives. One of her friends always intended to go back to work, but now she loves staying home.

"You want to allow yourself the option," Theresa said.

The way couples use their money in pre-child years opens or closes doors later on. Teaching Couple Kevin and Linda Gaboardi, of Danbury, Conn., both worked full-time when they got married, but they lived off one income; Linda's was saved toward a down payment on a house. When their first child was born in 1994, Linda was able to stay home.

When you drop to one income, make sure you can still cover your mortgage payments. That's why many CCL house hunters set their budget based on one income.

It's also possible for a parent at home to generate income. The obvious possibility is child care, but in one family the Brauns know, the stay-at-home husband does maintenance around the apartment building: mowing lawns, vacuuming hallways, and so forth. "There are businesses that can be run from home," Theresa said. "There are people who make tons of money writing blogs. Depending on your skill set, there are a lot of different options."

And circumstances change as the children grow. As the Gaboardis' children grew, the financial picture changed. Now Linda, who blogs at Theologyofthebody.blogspot.com, works as a music teacher.

You may not think you'll ever want to stay home, but why not plan for all possible options? You'll reap the benefits of greater financial prudence no matter what path you take.

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If you are a one-income family, what are your top tips for other couples who have that as their goal?

but also when you're engaged," said Lisa. "That Starbucks coffee adds up. How you spend in the present is going to affect your future reality."

Talk through all purchases.

"When I'm out shopping, I call Mark about a \$30 purchase," Chelle said. "Even small purchases. There are not a lot of surprises."

"Ours," not "his" and "hers."

When one person brings more debt to a marriage, it's tempting to think of the burden as belonging to that person alone. But CCL members Nathan and Theresa Braun, of Pardeeville, Wis., emphasize that individual debt is just another burden you must share.

Many people recommend keeping a single, joint checking account. But others suggest that more important is teamwork and transparency. "I don't think it really matters whether you have a single account or not," Holly said. "What matters is that you communicate regularly about where the money is and what it is being spent on and agree to how it is being used."

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Play to your strengths. "Sometimes one spouse may be more inclined to handle finances than the other," said Kevin and Linda Gaboardi, a Connecticut Teaching Couple. "Even though Linda handles all the finances in the house, we make all our money decisions together."

Find new sources of income.

Theresa Braun watches two children a few days a week. "The little girl I watch is almost the same age as my oldest son," she said. "They're learning how to socialize with one another. But I still have time just with my



boys. I think I get the best of both worlds.”

Budget. Nathan Braun recommends starting with tithing and the fixed expenses, such as housing, insurance, and so on. “Then food, gas, vehicles — figure out what you spend a month on food, the necessities. Now ask, ‘Can I afford cable, Internet? Can I afford to go out to eat?’”

Leave room to save money for unexpected expenses, like car repairs or a leaky roof. And of course, “There’s the money to set aside so you don’t have to work till you die!” Braun added. He echoes the Gaboardis’ advice, urging new parents to start planning for their children’s education early and to take out life insurance while it’s affordable.

For budgeting help, Steve and Holly Day recommend Crown Financial Ministries’ financial Bible study class or Dave Ramsey’s Financial Peace University.

Pay up front. “The American way is to go into debt,” said Nathan Braun. “If you can afford that monthly payment, [society says] that’s the way to do it. But if you can wait a year or two and save up and buy it with cash, you’re a lot better off.”

Weigh needs versus wants. Last year, Theresa Braun said, “We got a quote for siding on the house. We

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could’ve afforded the payment, but then we’d be strapped for five or 10 years. We could afford it today, but will we be able to afford it in a few years? It sounds great to have everything new and wonderful, but is it really necessary?” In their case, no. It was just for cosmetics.

Be creative with entertainment. The Smith-Vandergriffs take advantage of free activities like the library, local festivals, and exhibits; the Neilsens look for discounts and coupons. “We have to be creative,” Lisa said. “Like using Groupon. Choosing activities we know are free. One dollar taco nights.” The Gaboardis went without TV for several years to save on cable costs, and their family takes inexpensive vacations, such as camping trips. “It saves us a ton of money and keeps our family close,” they said.

Passing it on

Whatever your financial status, practice the kind of money management you can one day teach your children. The Brauns credit their financial health in part to their upbringing. “I always had a summer job,” Nathan said. “My parents helped a little with school, but I paid for it mostly myself by working.”

The Brauns have already begun teaching their almost-3-year-old, Ethan, about money. Instead of an allowance, he earns a set amount for a given chore. He has a piggybank and a savings account.

Theresa plans to one day tell him the same thing her parents told her when she asked for something. “My parents were willing to help, but there were times when they’d say, ‘If you really want it, you can buy it yourself.’ I’d decide if I really needed it, because then it was my money that I had to work hard for.”

If your financial picture is difficult, it can be tempting to follow the wisdom of the world and postpone having children “until you can afford them.” But in today’s economic climate, that may be an unreachable goal. Besides, no matter how tough things seem at present, you have the power to change them for the better.

In the meantime, the rewards of family make up for a great deal. “It’s been a long transition with our finances,” said John Neilsen. “It’s stressful, but it’s so worth it. At the end of a hard day at work, it’s such a reward to come home and see my baby’s face light up.”

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What lessons have you learned through managing finances with your spouse?