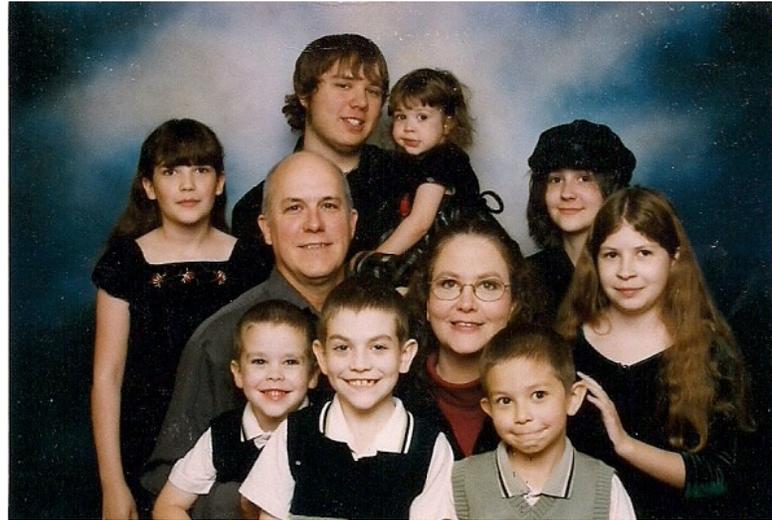


PICTURE PERFECT FAMILY

May, 2006

With eight children ranging in age from 20 to 2, I do not look forward to the prospect of having a family portrait made. In fact, I don't believe we've attempted that adventure since we were a family with six children. This past Christmas, however, I decided it was time to acknowledge the existence of those two younger children by updating the pictures on the living room wall. Hence a trip to the local portrait studio. I share with you here the surprisingly painless result. Don't we look lovely? A real Picture Perfect Family, aren't we?



The funny thing about family portraits is that there are so many things you don't see. For example, we all appear to be dressed in our Sunday finest - but three of us are wearing blue jeans, one of us in ragged jeans with strands of denim dragging the floor. (I won't say which one.) And as we were getting dressed that morning, we encountered the usual nightmare of finding socks for three little boys. In frustration I finally exclaimed, "You know what? It doesn't matter if they match - they won't show in the picture. Just find socks!" As we climbed into the van, I noticed that one of my younger sons was wearing his mud-caked play shoes. When my husband saw the look on my face, he reminded me, "They won't show in the picture."

When our portraits were ready, we were all delighted with the results. As I looked over our Picture Perfect Family, though, I couldn't help but smile as I thought of those hidden elements. It struck me that our family portrait can be likened to our family in general; in fact, it can be likened to every family. When we look at another family, we see the best face that they have put forward; but there are always hidden elements that we don't see. If we make the mistake of judging our family on the basis of what we see in another family, then we are likely to become discouraged or disheartened with our own efforts.

As a leader in the homeschooling community, I am often approached by homeschooling parents who see my family as a Picture Perfect Homeschooling Family. They think my children are cute and smart, clever and well-behaved. They see my husband's involvement and support of our homeschooling lifestyle as something to be envied. And guess what? My children are cute and smart, clever and.... well.... for the most part, well-behaved. I am very grateful for my husband's involvement and support. But, just like our family portrait, there are things that you do not see when you look at my family. You don't see siblings who delight in provoking younger siblings until they shriek. You don't see children who get frustrated with schoolwork and slam their books closed or burst into tears. You don't see a marriage sometimes strained by financial pressures or the demanding schedule of bookfair season. And - thank goodness! - you don't see my house after a hectic school week.

It is inevitable that we will look to other families to see if we are "doing it right." We can often learn valuable things by observing families we admire. I've learned new chore routines from families with cleaner homes. I've learned new disciplinary techniques from families with well-behaved children. But it would be a grave mistake to judge your family on the basis of what you observe in another family, because you are never seeing the full picture - no matter how Picture Perfect that family appears.

When I look back at my family portrait, let me forget for a moment the things you can't see and concentrate on what you can see. Do we look like a family of people who love one another? Well, that's real. Do we look like we might support and encourage one another? Yeah, that's us. In fact, the photographer was so taken by our family that she commented several times on our behavior. "Are they always this nice to each other?" "Do they always treat each other like that?" Well, no, they don't - but when it counts they are each other's greatest champions. As each pose was captured and we turned to look at the computer screen, we heard the following remarks - "Laura, that is such a great smile!" "Nathan, you are just adorable!" "Oh, look at Bekah!" When the shot was ruined by someone closing their eyes, it was, "It's okay, Dave!" When the photographer tried to place us in those less-than-natural positions to achieve the desired effect, no one pushed or shoved or complained. They did giggle and tease a little, but it was all in good fun. The photographer couldn't believe the way my 20-year-old son gently held and encouraged my 2-year-old daughter and she almost died when he picked up his 14-year-old sister and spun her around playfully. Those smiles on our faces? Those are genuine. We actually had a blast!

When you look at my family - when you look at any homeschooling family - please look at the real picture. We are all normal, struggling families with problems and mud-caked play shoes that you can't see. But we are families, doing our best to love, support, and encourage one another. Please do not base your decision to homeschool on what you think a Picture Perfect Homeschooling Family should be. Don't shy away from homeschooling because your family doesn't look like mine. Don't give up on homeschooling because your family hasn't achieved perfection. The Picture Perfect Homeschooling Family does not exist. We

are all just a bunch of people in ragged jeans and mud-caked shoes trying to hold it together. We can be thankful for one very important truth – God sees everything that is in the picture and everything that is hidden. He looks to see what is in the heart of your family, and if He sees Himself, then the picture is perfect.

Update, 2012 –

When this article was originally written, it had deep personal meaning. It was written just a few days before my oldest daughter began psychiatric treatment for a severe anxiety disorder that had led to a struggle with OCD, depression, and suicidal tendencies. At the time, we were keeping her mental health battle private. This article was written because I knew most of the home schooling community would be surprised to know about our family’s difficulties. In the six years since she began treatment, Laura has made remarkable progress and is now a healthy young woman. It is her heart’s desire that her story would help other young people who face the same problems, and we have seen God give her the desires of her heart. As we began to share her story publicly, we have seen many families encouraged. I have come home from several conferences to say, “Laura, your story gave another family hope!” She is now seeking ways to share the story herself, and hopes to start a blog soon.

But the story of the Picture Perfect Family doesn’t end there. While we have seen great victory, we have also suffered much as a family. We have seen financial crisis, major health problems, and the end of a marriage. Some of our struggles we share publicly, some remain private. We are still “just a bunch of people in ragged jeans and mud-caked shoes, trying to hold it together”. But God is faithful and we can still be thankful that He sees Himself in the heart of our family.

