

That 's My Dad

Written by Written By Nichole Brophy, Ryan Lorenzo, Amy Strand and Christine Whitton
/ Photographed by Jackie Mercandetti

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This month, we celebrate Father's Day, giving recognition to our father figured for their advice, selflessness and unconditional love. Meet five dads who go the extra mile in fatherhood.



Like most proud fathers, Timothy O'Connell simply glows when chatting about his 9-year-old son, Aeden. One glance and you'd pin him as your average, fun-loving dad—but rather than supporting his son just until adulthood, Timothy's fatherly duties will span a lifetime. Aeden was born with a rare, genetic defect called DiGeorge Syndrome, leaving him with a deformed heart and stomach (he must be fed through a G-Tube), mental delays and other complications. A mother's touch would have helped to handle these disabilities, but Timothy's wife left when Aeden was just 3 years old, making him responsible for raising a special needs child on his own.

Putting Aeden's best interests first, Timothy, now a single dad, moved them out of their large custom home and into a four-bedroom condo in Mesa—one that was near bus stops, grocery stores, schools, the soon-to-be Metro Rail and possible future employment—all important criteria for Aeden as an adult. "You start thinking about what if something happens to me. You just have to think that way, and most parents don't. Most parents say, 'My kid's going to go to college and then I'm done.' I will be taking care of [Aeden] for the rest of my life," Timothy says.

Those lifelong duties include providing financial support, and after a long, lucrative career in the technology industry, Timothy no longer had the luxury to work long hours and travel for business. "I needed to change something. Trying to take care of my little guy and trying to have a professional career was insane," he says. "I had to do something that afforded me a lot of flexibility. The only way I was going to get that flexibility was to own my own business." Given Timothy's outgoing and giving nature, the business he was about to embark upon would undoubtedly showcase those qualities.

After continuing his career in technology locally for one year after making this choice (and spending a limited time in the office each day to accommodate Aeden), Timothy was inspired to start Southwest Concierge in 2005—a convenience-based service that continues to grow, today serving 14,000 clients spread across 30 Arizona condo, apartment and business properties, as well as newly-acquired national contracts. Now, instead of traveling or rushing to and from work, Timothy's main office is run out of the downstairs of his home, with his and Aeden's rooms upstairs. Such career flexibility (and the help of a personal assistant) affords Timothy the ability to schedule his day around Aeden's needs: doctor and hospital appointments, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy and anything else that may come up.

Timothy bursts with excitement when showing off photos of his adorable little boy and describing their fun outings; it's clear Timothy wouldn't change a thing about his son and their life together. "Aeden is remarkable in that he allows everybody to be themselves," he says. "Once you accept him for who he is, you realize he's a really great person."

Indeed, Aeden is a one-of-a-kind kid with a unique dad to match. "[Aeden] just wants to be a good person, so you take that and you help him become that," Timothy says. "He's just got a heart the size of a planet." —A.S.

Chris Snyder

Kids: Chase, 4; Thalia, 2



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As a starting player for the Arizona Diamondbacks, Chris Snyder has emerged as one of the top catchers in the Major Leagues. Any baseball fan can tell you that his offensive production has increased every year, and at 28 years old, he's just now reaching his prime. During the dog days of summer, his wife and two kids sit in the stands and cheer him on. "I think the best part of my day is after a game, seeing my little guy come running into the clubhouse," Snyder says. "He doesn't care how I did; he's just happy to see his daddy."—R.L.

Best Father's Day gift: "Chase was about 8 months old and I got to the [ball] park in San Francisco and somehow my wife found a way to put a tape recorder in my locker of him talking and laughing. To this day I will still listen to that tape."

On how they spend quality time: "We'll wrestle, play baseball or run through the house playing dodge ball. The whole family gets involved. It's always a fun, chaotic mess."

Erik Peterson

Kids: Ridge, 6; Noelle, 4



While establishing himself as a top architect in the West, Erik Peterson, president of Scottsdale-based Peterson Architecture & Associates, and architect and planner of The Ritz-Carlton Residences, Paradise Valley, is also a busy father of two. After a long day at the office, Peterson enjoys the simple pleasures of snuggling up on the couch with his kids and reading a book together. —R.L.

On creating a kid-friendly home: "The entire home at this point has now become their house. I wanted our family room to maintain a little bit of cleanness, so we cleared out the entire living room and dining room so that could become their big play area."

Fatherly advice: "[My wife and I] always tell them about the golden rule, which is 'Do unto others as you would want then done unto yourself.' They've got it down, but then we say, 'O.K. explain it,' and they get kind of confused."

Greg Bielli

Kids: Matthew, 23; and twin girls, Katelyn and Courtney, 17



Greg Bielli, president of Newland Communities's Western region, knows what's needed to balance a high-powered career and three young adults. His ticket to happiness undoubtedly is family. Described as "focused" by his wife Vicki as well as by family and friends, Bielli's absolute attention is on his children. Bielli recalls his oldest child, Matthew's days of playing junior high football and basketball—proudly noting that he rarely missed a game. Today, the family keeps up with their twin girls: Katelyn, a captain for the Desert Mountain High School girls' basketball team and Courtney, a competitive horse jumper. Bielli says his best memories come from being his children's biggest fan, whether in the stands or on the field. —C.W.

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Biggest challenge of fatherhood: "My biggest challenge was seeing my kids go through tough times, making decisions and letting them grow from them."

On what his kids have taught him: "Humility. It doesn't matter how far you've come in the ranks of business or how important that may be to others; it's the kids that bring you back down to earth."

Fatherly advice: "Be happy and true to yourself."

Sean McLaughlin

Kids: Mia, 5; Jack, 3; and Peter, 2



After establishing a successful broadcasting career in the Valley, Sean McLaughlin, 42, moved his family to New York City to become MSNBC's chief meteorologist. It was during the busy hurricane season of 2005 that McLaughlin felt the strain on his work/family balance. "We were pregnant with Jack at the time and I had to send my wife back to Phoenix to have Jack." Though McLaughlin made it to Phoenix in time to welcome Jack into the world, he was faced with a dilemma. "I had to decide if I was going to work all my life or whether I was going to balance family and work. I chose the second one." Now back in the Valley as chief meteorologist and anchor for KPHO Channel 5, McLaughlin and his clan enjoy spending time together in many ways, especially hiking Squaw Peak. —N.B.

What his kids have taught him: "I don't think I have ever met a journalist with a lot of patience, but when you have three kids, 5 and under, you really gain a perspective of patience," McLaughlin says, laughing. "I think they have taught me that careers aren't everything, that to me the true measure of success of a man is if he is a good father."

What he looks forward to for his children: "I don't think there can be any greater reward than raising a child who contributes to society," McLaughlin says. "It takes a lot of sacrifice, but you have to in order for them to grow up and be good, loving kids. And if you make that sacrifice, you are going to get rewarded over and over again down the line."