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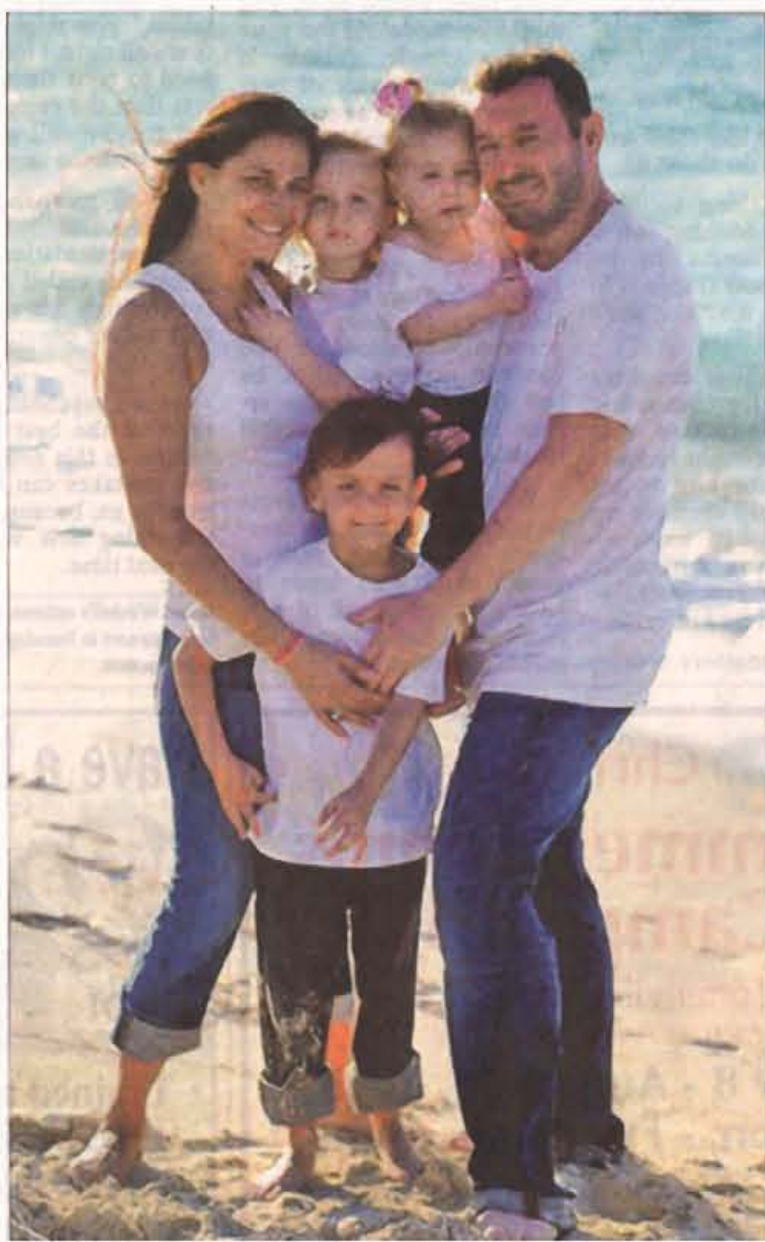
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COURTESY OF DR. JERRY CAMMARATA

In 1973, Dr. Jerry Cammarata made national headlines for becoming the first father in the United States to fight for and receive paternity leave. The Rosebank resident is seen in this 1974 file photo feeding his 1-year-old daughter, Michelle.

WHY MEN PASS ON PATERNITY LEAVE

Many dads-to-be opt to put their career ahead of more time at home bonding with baby



COURTESY OF GLEN DEVORA

Glen Devora, right, requested paternity leave from his employer, the Eltingville law firm of D'Agostino and Associates, when his children were born. Here, he poses with his wife, Shari, their son, Jacob, 7, and 4-year-old twins, Joshua and Sophie.

By ELISE MCINTOSH / STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

Dr. Jerry Cammarata is a big advocate of paternity leave, believing that all new fathers should be entitled to the employee benefit. He stresses that this time off is a critical opportunity for working dads to bond with their newborns, a finite moment when they truly become invested in their child's development.

Yet, it's been 40 years since the Rosebank resident made national headlines for becoming the first father in the United States to fight for and receive paternity leave and, still, very few working dads take much, if any, parental leave after the birth or adoption of a child.

According to a CareerBuilder survey conducted last year, 43 percent of new dads did not take any leave. Of those who did take some time off, 59 percent took a week or less — even though the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) entitles them to up to 12 weeks of unpaid paternity leave. (Conditions apply.)

Money, or lack thereof, may be what's preventing some dads-to-be from requesting leave. While some states, such as California and New Jersey, and companies, like Yahoo, Bank of America and PriceWaterhouseCoopers, offer paid paternity leave, in most cases, it's granted without compensation.

Yet, if Dr. Cammarata can take off an entire four years without pay — which the former teacher did after winning a 1973 case against the city Board of Education, which originally denied him leave — other men certainly can go without a salary for a few weeks or months in order to bond with their new bundle of joy.

So what's holding dads back from spending more time with their pride and joy? A fear of how their career might be affected.

Usually, Dr. Cammarata explained, paternity leave "is not built into the culture of the company," causing many employees to view it as a "perk" rather than a "right." He said working dads are afraid if they seek time off, they will be ostracized by co-workers or viewed as "not loyal to the company."

Even though the FMLA guarantees parents who take parental leave a return to their job (or a similar one) with the same salary, benefits, working conditions and seniority, many men still are concerned their career will take a hit.

"The whole question of what happens to you in the pecking order if you take off X number of months" is a worry that weighs on many working dads' minds, said Dr. Miles Groth.

The psychology professor at Wagner College noted this perspective isn't as pervasive in academe, where teachers are tenured and don't feel

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Few dads take paternity leave

like they are "losing time on the clock" if they take a semester off. "But," as he pointed out, "there's no such thing in the corporate world."

NOT THE NORM

Though Glen Devora is in the competitive field of law, knowing his firm, D'Agostino and Associates, Eltingville, has family-friendly policies helped ease his mind when the attorney requested paternity leave seven years ago.

The Manalapan, N.J., resident asked for several weeks off when he and his wife, Shari, were expecting their first child, Jacob, through a surrogate mother who lived in Georgia, and wished to travel there ahead of the due date.

When Devora took a longer break than originally planned, his employer, Jonathan D'Agostino, was happy to accommodate his request, reassuring him that this is a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

During his absence, Devora reports he received full medical benefits and a "proper" salary.

But, the attorney realizes he's in a rare spot. While his co-workers were totally supportive of his decision, other lawyers seemed surprised.

"It's great you have that kind of flexibility," others told him. "It implies that if they were in the same shoes, they would not have been able to take time off," he said.

For Devora, those weeks away from the office were a "huge benefit."

"It allowed for me to develop a bit of a bond with this unborn fetus and spend time together as a family after the birth," he said.

"Had I missed that, it would have had a [negative] impact," Devora continued. Especially in his case, where he was removed from nine



COURTESY OF DR. JERRY CAMMARATA

Dr. Jerry Cammarata, author of the book "The Fun Book of Fatherhood," took a four-year paternity leave to help raise his kids. In this 1974 file photo are two of his three children: Elizabeth, then 4, works in the Bursar's Office at the College of Staten Island, and, Michelle, then 1, who is a physician on Staten Island.

months of pregnancy, he believes he would not have been "as prepared" had he just taken a last-minute flight down for his son's delivery.

Devora — who sought time off again when he and his wife were expecting twins, Joshua and Sophie, from the same surrogate — said he feels more loyal to the company as a result of the flexibility and support he was shown.

Dr. Cammarata, dean of student affairs at Touro College of Osteopathic Medicine, argues that instilling this kind of loyalty is one reason more companies should offer paternity leave.

WILL IT CHANGE?

In order to change that, Dr. Cammarata said more Americans need to "push the government and push the dialogue" on "policies that sustain the family."

He noted countries such as Finland, Sweden, Brazil, Australia and Indonesia are ahead of the curve and already offer paid paternity leave.

Dr. Groth, who has relatives in Sweden, said parents there also are encouraged to adjust their work schedule so both parents split child-rearing duties. And from what he's heard from his relatives, this time with their children "is something these fathers really look forward to."

Dr. Groth, who heads the Men's Center at Wagner College, an organization devoted to scholarly research on boys and men, sees that "the American culture isn't as willing to experiment as other countries."

"There is still a stigma attached to men being connected with what have been traditionally feminine roles," he observed.

While Dr. Groth does believe there is a gradual shift in attitude, he believes there is much work that still needs to be done in challenging these well-defined gender roles.

Until more trailblazers like Dr. Cammarata help pave the way, paternity leave likely will remain an unpopular choice.

Tips for men taking leave

When Dr. Jerry Cammarata took off four years from working as a teacher to help raise his children, his family had to adapt to a new lifestyle.

To make it work financially, he and his wife, Margaret, moved in with her parents. The couple also trimmed their budget, and Dr. Cammarata worked part-time as a speech language pathologist.

He advises men who plan to take paternity leave to get a head start on saving, putting money into a baby fund as soon as possible.

Attorney Glen Devora, who asked his employer for paternity leave on two separate occasions, recommends promptly telling an employer that you are considering being out of the office for X period of time.

He did that with his employer, Jonathan D'Agostino, so that they could take a look at the calendar and figure out how to lighten his work load.

"Don't be shy. The sooner you ask for it, the better," Devora said.

Finally, Dr. Cammarata advised men "not to worry about the perception" others might have about their taking leave, but "focus on what's important to them."

— Elise McIntosh