

Couple with 14 children offers family advice, other support at storefront ministry in Frankfort



The Littleton family poses for a Thanksgiving photo together in 2015. Parents James and Kathleen Littleton (farthest left) own The Family Hearth in downtown Frankfort and share their experiences from raising 14 children with those who come into the store and ask about their family. Photo submitted

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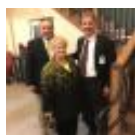
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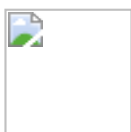


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Rebecca Susmarski, Editor

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Being a mom or dad and managing a household is always a tough job, but luckily, parents Jim and Kathleen Littleton always had plenty of backup.

The Frankfort couple has a total of 14 children including two boys and 12 girls, with the youngest child being at age 10 and the oldest at age 30. Currently four of the Littletons' children live at home during the school year and eight during the summer, when their four college-aged children come home for break.

Many of the Littletons' older children have pursued careers in service; their eldest daughter Shannon once worked for Archdiocese of Chicago, their son Shane will soon be graduating from a seminary and several of their other children work as teachers. The parents, who have owned The Family Heath

general store and storefront ministry in downtown Frankfort for about three years, are willing to share their experiences as parents with anyone who comes into the store and inquires.

“It gives people hope that they too can get through the joys and the struggles of raising little children, and what a blessing it really is,” Kathleen said. “We hope to encourage other people with that — how beautiful family life can be.”

Over the years, the parents kept track of their children by making sure they weren't involved in too many extracurricular activities, so the couple would not spread themselves thin by being involved in too many clubs or sports. To accomplish daily chores and other activities, the couple came up with a “Littleton family manual” that administered different responsibilities to each child.

They also paired a younger child with an older child, and the older sibling would teach the younger how to do a certain task so then the older child could take on a more difficult one. Kathleen said the children who had been paired together have close sibling connections to this day.

The Catholic family also stayed close by going to mass together every day, saying prayers together after dinner each night and frequently reading, walking and playing card games together. They also make sure to still celebrate birthdays and anniversaries and take family trips to their cottage all together.

“We don't let kids go off and sit in their room with the computer when we're together,” Kathleen said. “Even with just the four youngest at home, every night we gather together in the same room and spend a couple hours together, just relaxing with a movie or something. It's just a really special bond.”

That bond helped the family members when they endured some very difficult times. After Jim was diagnosed with leukemia in 2009, his then 23-year-old daughter Grace quit her part-time job

to be able to help with the family while Kathleen visited Jim in the hospital.

The children also celebrated their birthday parties in the hospital room with Jim, and they served as a motivation for him to stay strong and overcome his illness.

“We tried to be as normal as possible, and just positive and go on with our lives,” Jim said. “We always just kept pushing forward and kept hope that I would recover, but I think [the children] kind of presumed that I would.”

Kathleen emphasized that not only their children supported the family during that difficult time. She found clothes at the family’s back door and money in their mailbox, and the family accepted meal deliveries from anonymous donors for “literally three years.”

The couple offer a cancer support group, a needlework social group for women and other free programs at The Family Hearth with the goal of giving back to those who helped their family, but others may have also benefitted from their parenting advice. The Littletons wrote a book on their parental experiences in 2006 called “Better by the Dozen, Plus Two” and then a sequel, and they have also given talks on TV and the radio about their experiences.

All of the Littletons’ older children still live in the Chicago area, and some of them work for Jim at Littleton Claims Service Inc., an insurance claims service also located in Frankfort. The Littletons also have one grandchild and another one on the way, ready to add more love to the family that Kathleen described as being “multiplied” in blessings with each added member.

“It’s kept my heart young, loving and giving,” she said. “I’m still doing things for my children that I did 30 years ago with my oldest child, in terms of school activities and taking them to their ballet and drama lessons. It keeps my outlook young and hopeful to

know I'm still so needed by my family."

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