

family living

Kathleen Ryan, editor

Fatherhood's a full-time job

By BARBARA HUEBNER
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STATEN ISLAND — Striding up the walk to collect his daughters from school, Jerry Cammarata is a pair of slacks among skirts, a mustache among shades of lipstick.

Mothers stand in clumps waiting for their children to sprint through the doors after a day of spring picnics and class trips, and the father has a greeting — mostly by name — for them all. "Sister Pancakes," who teaches his youngest, gets something extra: an affectionate Italian hug.

The slender, vested dad has a special affinity for both mothers and children: In 1973, he was the first man in the country to be awarded paternity leave. He has since written about his ups and downs in "The Fun Book of Fatherhood," to be released this month in softcover. A hardcover run celebrates its first anniversary on none other than Father's Day.

"I can understand why mothers end up in the cashew-nut house sometimes," he said over lunch last week.

His most famous trick for avoiding parental insanity is to go to the dogs ... and the giraffes, the monkeys and the bears. The elaborate subtitle of his book — "Or How the Animal Kingdom is Helping to Raise the Wild Kids at Our House" — explains it. When Cammarata hits a snag in the fine fabric of fatherhood, he looks to the wilds by way of example.

"Animals offer such law, order, respect — all the things that we think are good traits," Cammarata explained. "Seagulls will pull feathers off their back to be sure the nest is warm. To adults, that example is cute, but to kids it says, 'Wow, you mean they take feathers off their own back for their children?'"

Indeed, he once described himself as part seagull and part termiter: seagull because "I would do anything to support my family" and termiter because "termites respect their senior citizens." Cammarata's in-laws live in the upper floor of his home, adding a generation of wisdom and example to the household.

"It's important for my children to see me act with respect to my elders," Cammarata said.

Elizabeth, 10, and Michelle, 6, have nothing if not respect for their father, but neither are they in awe of him. There is no mugging for a photographer, no showing off

for a visitor. Cammarata insists he is not a celebrity, and his daughters seem to agree. The girls, their mother, Margaret, a cousin, Robert, and dad pile into a green Plymouth wagon for the trip home from school and several intermediate stops. One is to drop mom off for a doctor's appointment.

Do you like having your father home a lot?

"It's fun. He does things with us," says Elizabeth, her braces glinting in the sunshine of the Cammarata backyard, which is primarily occupied by a round swimming pool in which the girls like to play otter.

What do you think of all the attention your father is getting?

A small shrug and a big smile from Michelle, as she runs unconcerned to the swing.

The attention lately includes his nomination to the White House Conference on the Family, for which he is being supported by Reps. John M. Murphy, D-17, and Mario Biaggi, D-10; Staten Island Deputy Borough President Ralph J. Lambert, and several other prominent individuals. Also on the agenda is a 1982 television movie of the week based on the book.

Attention in the past has included a spot in the Guinness Book of World Records for the longest recorded solo singing marathon, set in a bathtub — minus water — being towed around New York City. The 75 hours he spent leading up to the record, he said, helped teach his children the value of perseverance.

His profession of audiology was the root of another unusual project: an album for plants built around the theory that pure tone sounds create a greater flow of protoplasm and help stomata stay open longer, permitting greater respiration and growth. He recorded the tones heard in hearing tests for the album. A poster for the album and a related personal appearance hangs in his office among photographs of himself with others of fame or fascinating fortune.

But his favorite role is that of "Super Pop."

It began in the early 1970s, when Cammarata, a speech teacher, was on leave granted by the New York City Board of Education to spend a year working on his doctoral dissertation. Besides his full-time teaching job, he was holding several part-time positions, often racing from one to the other. His wife, Margaret, was pregnant



Record photos by Barbara Huebner

Jerry Cammarata

with Michelle, and after a few months home with Elizabeth, Cammarata decided to take the plunge into full-time fatherhood.

His first step was to apply for paternity leave from his teaching position, which was initially denied. He sued, and the Federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission ruled in his favor.

"It was truly a landmark decision that has not been contested in court as of yet, and only because no one has a leg to stand on as I see it," Cammarata said. "How can you deny that kind of equal rights?"

The leave was for four years, the same as the policy for maternity leave. Cammarata stayed home full-time the first two years and worked about 10 hours a week as an audiologist the next two. He now works part-time at the U.S. Public Health Hospital on Staten Island and has a private audiology practice.

"I've decided never to take a full-time job again," he vowed, adding that his part-time positions can be juggled to provide sufficient income, yet allow him to be home during his daughters' waking hours.

Cammarata emphasizes that he and his wife did not switch roles. Mrs. Cammarata did not take a job outside the home until this school year, when Michelle began kindergarten. She is secretary to the chairman of the Department of Music at Wagner College.

"Role reversal adds nothing," Cammarata explained. "It's the combined total ef-

fort of the parents. That way, the children can begin to see that there are variables: Mommy does something this way, daddy does it another way."

The concept of solving problems by looking at the animal world came to him while in the yard one day, he said. "Anything we can think of, they've already tried."

Cammarata cites three aspects to parenting: "Parents need to be friends with their kids; they need to be parents, and they need to be an authority figure, which all too often is forgotten about. Kids need to know that the definitive answer to many things has to come from the parent."

That doesn't mean he knows it all. "As many parents there are, that's how many ways there are to accomplish something admirably."

He said the biggest advantages to his stint at home were "seeing the girls develop more outgoing personalities, with the ability to verbalize their feelings to us" and that now "there are those fathers who are looking at their time more carefully, even if it's only saving their weekends for their family."

The phone rings, and "Super Pop" smiles into the receiver. Margaret is finished with her doctor's appointment. She is, indeed, pregnant.

"The doctor said the baby's due in January and will be either a boy or a girl," Cammarata announced, and paused. "He promised ... no animals!"



"Super Pop" gives his youngest daughter, Michelle, a lift from school. The eldest, Elizabeth, and his wife, Margaret, join them.



Michelle gets into the swing of things in the Cammarata's backyard after school.