

Eileen Rodriguez: A smile for all

A quote from Mother Teresa of Calcutta describes the philosophy that Eileen Rodriguez lives by: *“Smile at each other, smile at your wife, smile at your husband, smile at your children, smile at each other – it doesn’t matter who it is – and that will help you to grow up in greater love for each other.”*

And the bubbly, blonde-haired general manager for SSA at the Sacramento Zoo smiles plenty and lives each day to the fullest with her family.

Eileen said her husband, Gil, is “awesome.” He spoils her by ironing her work clothes every morning, fixing her coffee each morning and making the bed each day. In exchange, she helps him raise his children.



Wedding in Tahoe

Eileen said when she married Gil while standing on a rock in Lake Tahoe on April 16, 2000, she also married his children. She lives for their children: Brandon, 21, Sean, 18, and Brooke, 15. She’ll soon be a grandmother, but she declared the baby will not call her grandma, but “Nana.”

The family also has two cats, Fluffy and Bisquit, as well as two goldfish. The fish no longer appear gold, but white. Eileen claims the color is due to age – the fish are five years old.



Every Thursday night she hosts a family dinner. They sit down at the dinner table, say grace, share thoughts and opinions and eat. The teenagers are encouraged to bring friends. Eileen is a good cook, and Mexican food is her specialty even though she said she’s a blonde.

Thursday night also is one of the few nights that Eileen watches television. Her favorite show, Friends, aired on this night for years.



Eileen's Mother and Stepfather

Eileen's also close to her mother, stepfather and four siblings. She calls her mother her best friend. "She's a blast." Her mother must be a saint as she raised four children who all were born within six years, and then had another child when the youngest was four.

Her parents live nearby in Elk Grove, where she grew up. She's closest to her brother, Sean. As she describes it, "we're a year apart twins." She was born on her brother's first birthday. Even though they're close today, it wasn't always that way. She laughingly claimed they used to hate each other because they had to share birthday parties and as a result, they couldn't invite as many friends.

Today, Sean is a chef in Sacramento and a part-time bartender for SSA, but Eileen said they have friendly disagreements on how to cook. She believes in using bacon grease to cook certain things, and her brother totally opposes that belief.

Her sister, Laura, lives in Elk Grove, too, while her other two brothers, Michael and Pat, live in the Seattle area.

Thanksgiving promises to be a new experience for the family. After last year's Thanksgiving, her mother retired after 48 years from cooking. She passed the tradition of hosting and cooking the family Thanksgiving dinner to Eileen.



Eileen with her "year apart twin" brother Sean. Birthday party at Farrow's



Eileen (center) camping with her brothers, sister, and family friend.

Eileen claims she has never baked a turkey before, but she's not worried because her mom shared the family recipe for turkey stuffing – complete with potatoes. However, she threatens to serve store-bought pies.

Regardless of the menu, Thanksgiving will remain Eileen's favorite holiday because it's a family day – the only day both sides of the families get together with friends and coworkers who don't have other plans. The result is a laughter-filled dinner shared with anywhere from 12 to 30 people.

The family also camps together at Shasta Lake, the largest reservoir in the state of California. They pitch their tents, swim and boat during the day and party all night. The week-long reunion attracts between 30 – 40 family and friends.

Sharing the smiles

Eileen has shared her smiles with Special Olympics for many years. She started helping with the program when she was in high school, progressing to being a certified coach for softball, bowling, skiing and track and field. Coaches are not just coaches, but teachers, role models, mentors and friends to the athletes.



Camping at Shasta Lake.



Special Olympic athlete Cindy shares a smile with Eileen (above).



Special Olympic ski team at Boreal with Eileen (lower right).

taste various wines and choose a few to take home to enjoy. After a day's work, Eileen shared that she likes to sit around her pool at home with her family and relax with a glass of wine. While visiting ZooBoise, she had the opportunity to taste Idaho wine, and

Eileen still carries a silver medal, not a gold one. She explained it's not the color of the medal that's important, but that you do your best and succeed by crossing the finish line. Eileen took a leave of absence from Special Olympics to spend more time with her family, but plans to return to coaching.

When her husband romances her, Eileen also smiles. She said she loves to be romanced, and she's fortunate to have a husband that knows how. Eileen shared that on one Valentine's Day, Gil left a single red rose on her car seat and that evening he gave her another red rose. He knows that a single rose means as much to her as a dozen red roses. She said she hates to waste the money buying a bouquet.

For their wedding anniversaries, they buy a plant for their yard. Their enjoyment is simple: by taking care of it and watering it, the plant will grow as their love grows.

They both enjoy taking day and weekend trips to nearby attractions. A favorite destination is Napa Valley where they can

she said she was pleasantly surprised at how good it was. Another surprise was the wine she tasted while visiting Mexico. She didn't think it would be any good, but it was.

Eileen would like to travel to the Fiji Islands to enjoy several of the 300 islands in its archipelago. She said she's a sun-worshiper. However, she jokingly claimed her husband doesn't love her enough to sit on a plane for the 20 plus hours it would take to get there, so she probably won't get to see the beauty of the coral reefs. (Gil dislikes flying.)

While Gil dislikes flying, it didn't stop Eileen from skydiving in May 2001. To help celebrate a friend's 40th birthday, she jumped tandem with an instructor over the California landscape. She said it was an experience she would do again as she liked the experience of free-falling. "Everyone should do it," she added.

Eileen loves to run. She tries to run anywhere from one to five miles a day. She likes to do fun runs for charity, but her work schedule prevents her from doing many. She shared she's thinking of running a marathon in the next year or so. Eileen plans to participate in one that supports either the stroke association or cancer society, as she believes in giving back and spreading her good fortune.



Eileen & Gil in Hawaii



Eileen's tandem skydive, 2001

Gil also shares Eileen's desire to help others. They support various area charities by attending fund-raising dinners. They figure they have to eat, and by buying a ticket, they're supporting a good cause as well as getting a good dinner and making new friends.

Eileen said that many people would be surprised to learn that she is shy and is terrified to talk to a large group of people. To overcome this fear, she joined Toastmasters, an international communications organization, a year ago. She has received accolades for several of her speeches: a couple of firsts in Table Topics, where she had to give a one to two minute impromptu speech, and in prepared speech. For both of her prepared speeches, she talked about her family. With her enthusiasm, it's no wonder she scored high.

Even though she's a California girl, Eileen fervently supports the Pittsburgh Steelers. Her fourth grade teacher turned her into a fan because he always talked about his brother, Ray Mansfield, who was a linebacker

in the mid-70s on the team. Mansfield still holds the team record for the most consecutive games played -- a 182 games. He also started in the first two Steeler Super Bowls in 1975 and 1976. Her teacher, Mr. Mansfield, always showed sports memorabilia, discussed the games and even had his brother come and visit. Eileen said she can still remember the day the sports star visited. She remembers how he towered over her; she was only five feet tall.

Providing excellent customer service began at an early age

Eileen started washing dishes in a local restaurant when she was 14 years old. Laughing, she said the good catholic girl lied about her age to get the job. She told the owners she was 16. Eileen finally confessed to the owners when she turned 16 because they thought she had turned 18 and wanted her to start serving alcohol.

In 1981, she took a Christmas job at a local Hallmark store. She worked for Hallmark for the next 19½ years. She lost her job as manager when the owner decided to sell the store. Eileen did have the opportunity to buy a Hallmark store, but she said she didn't want to own a store because she said she didn't want to work that hard.

While looking for a job, she saw the SSA job advertised and applied. She said she loves working for SSA because it's one big family. She said working at the zoo is perfect because she likes to be out in the sun and loves retail and selling to people.



Eileen's first communion day.



Eileen camping with son Sean, and nephew Jordan

For many years, her friends and co-workers called her the energizer bunny because she went full charge day and night helping people and enjoying life. However, when she was little, her family called her Sunshine. However, either name describes her enthusiasm for life.

Eileen admits once she takes off her work uniform, she's "crazy." "I've never grown up from being a teenager," she added. And she's like a teenager – filled with energy and enthusiasm.

"Everyone asks me where I find all my energy," she said, "The truth is I'm just high on life. If I'm happy and can share a smile or a special moment with someone, it makes my whole day."