

Sunday Spotlight



LIFE WITH FATHER

For Pueblo's Bill Thiebault, 15 kids makes life a family affair. 12D

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A MAJOR DAD

STATE SEN. BILL THIEBAULT EARNS THE RIGHT TO 15 FATHER'S DAY PRESENTS

By James B. Meadow ♦ Photos by Steven R. Nickerson

PUEBLO—TJ. was busy scooting around on his tractor-tricycle; Sarah and Hilary were launching themselves off the trampoline; Molly was eating a popsicle; Katie was complaining that someone had smacked her in the head with a sack of marshmallows; Melissa was still at school; Tim was downstairs, maybe lifting weights; Rebecca was in her room, dividing her attention between homework and the *Rosie O'Donnell Show*.

Ladies and gentlemen, meet Bill Thiebault's kids. At least meet nine of them. As for Fran, Christina, Jennifer, Elizabeth, Billy, Emily and Mark, well, they're all grown up and sort of scattered. Of course, they'll be around sometime soon. Maybe at holiday time. Or at those family reunions that are way past populous.

In an era when the American family is downsizing and two-for-two seems to be the national mantra, Bill Thiebault and his one and only wife of 30 years, Mary Ann, are staunch procreators. If some couples can be considered fruitful, what Bill and Mary Ann have brought forth on this planet is a veritable orchard: Sandwiched between Fran, 29, and T.J., 4, have come 13 other Thiebaults, for a total of 15 children. All theirs. All natural births.

Talk about a no-brainer selection for a Father's Day story.

"Mary Ann and I always wanted a large family, but I can safely say my goal was never 15," says Bill Thiebault, a 49-year-old lawyer and state senator whose demeanor is so calm and face so unlined that a stranger is initially inclined to suspect that some Faustian plot is afoot.

"I thought eight or nine would be good," says the man who has but one sibling himself. "But after nine, the others just came along. It was sort of a, uh, natural phenomenon, I guess."

The natural phenomenon dawned Oct. 23, 1967, when Fran was born, 14 months after Bill and Mary Ann had gone from high school sweethearts to 18-year-old newlyweds. Before Fran was 10, she had four sisters and two brothers. By the time she was 18, she had 10 siblings.

"Actually, it seemed strange when my mother *wasn't* pregnant," recalls Fran Romero (nee Thiebault), 29, who was already out of the house and on her own by the time her ensuing three sisters and one brother were born.

Despite the glut of Thiebaults, Fran says, no one got shortchanged when it came to special

days. Oh sure, there were fewer gifts for the older kids on Christmas, but, "We were always acknowledged on our birthdays, always treated fairly."

Which is not to say that everybody has been treated equally.

"Oh yeah, my father was much stricter early on," says Fran, her tone more matter-of-fact than resentful. "As each child came along, he became more lenient."

Thiebault more or less corroborates this, observing, "A lot of things that made me uptight 20 years ago don't make me so uptight now."

He pauses, thinks and adds, "I think I do things differently because I have more experience."

For one, he's not nearly as inclined to go ballistic when one of the younger Thiebaults scribbles in one of his books or papers. He's also less rigid about curfews. And Fran says the chores that were *de rigueur* for her and her contemporary siblings have fallen prey to her father's more laissez-faire attitude.

While he doesn't quite subscribe to the theory that there is chore anarchy around the house, Thiebault does admit that a technique such as typing a list of chores and expecting the kids to follow through "never works."

"Do the kids willingly and freely do their chores, like taking out the trash and keeping their rooms clean? No," he says, adding with a smile, "so we're a regular family in that respect, I guess."

Still, a strong strain of communal responsibility runs through the household. Older siblings have always had to learn to change diapers and look after the younger ones, prompting Dad to pronounce, "We've always been lucky in that we've had a built-in baby sitter for more than 15 years."

Furthermore, early in life, Thiebault kids learn that they have to earn their spending dough.

"There are three paper routes in the house now," says Thiebault. "For 12 years, Thiebaults have held down those routes." Additionally, you might find a Thiebault earning money by doing something like waiting tables or keeping score at local school basketball games.

His insistence on his kids' plunging their tootsies into the part-time job pool isn't exclusively rooted in his belief that "work teaches kids responsibility." It's also based on economic reality because life has not been a cakewalk for the Thiebaults.

When there were just a few kids (as long ago as that must seem), Bill was going to college, then law school at night. By the time he passed the bar, the Thiebault population explosion had taken on such prodigious proportions that belt tightening was a way of life. Or as Bill



Bill Thiebault and daughter Hilary, 12, are a show of family ties during kindergarten graduation ceremony for Thiebault's daughter Molly.

puts it, "We've done it by being frugal in a good, old-fashioned way."

First of all, Mary Ann is a wizard at wielding supermarket coupons to maximum effect. "She has been very economical and wise in purchasing, in stretching our dollars," her admiring husband says.

Beyond frugality, there is generosity. Relying on the kindness of friends (and, sometimes, strangers), the Thiebaults are often the recipients of donations. These donations may take the form of victuals (as in, say, extra food from barbecues). But more often, those sacks left on the front lawn contain clothing. (Wearing hand-me-downs is a rite of passage for all young Thiebaults, Fran says.)

As you might expect, given the financial tightrope the Thiebaults navigate, their abode has never been a candidate for any home-beautiful magazine.

"I can't remember the last time we bought a new piece of furniture," Bill says, his hand sweeping around the living room to indicate chairs and sofas that have been repaired and recovered but not replaced. "We'd rather have good bikes to ride or soccer balls to kick than fancy stuff, I guess," adds the man who only two years ago broke down and bought a VCR and still hasn't succumbed to the siren call of cable television.

If the house has that lived-in look, it's a tidy lived-in look.

"One of the things I'm amazed by is that, well, I have four children and yet Bill and Mary

If you're thinking you can't tell the Thiebault kids without a scorecard, you might be right. Here-with, the roster (with birth dates). Note the preponderance of July births, beginning with Mark, and be grateful you don't have to plan birthday parties.

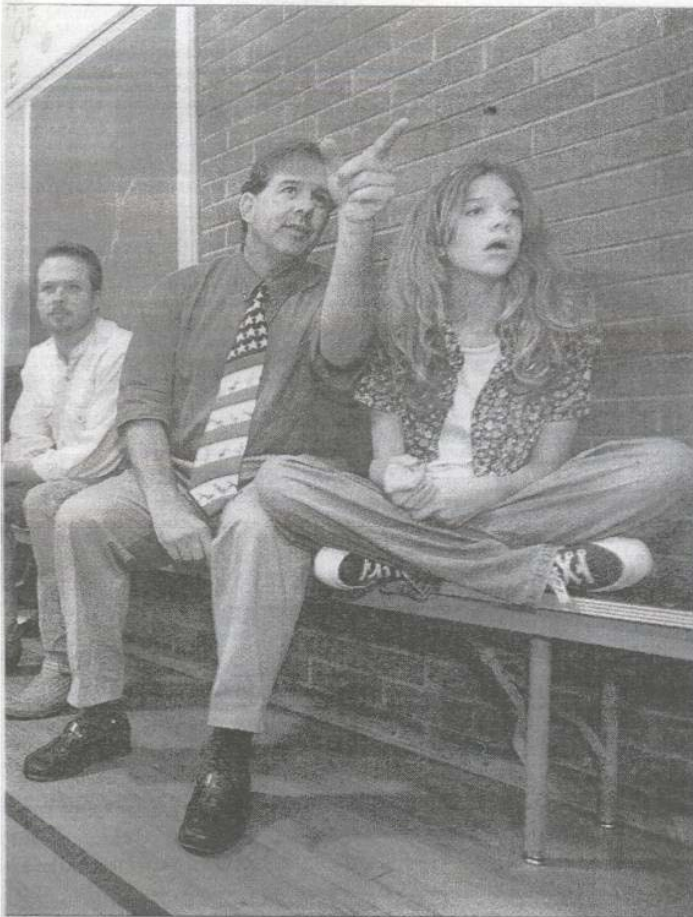
- FRAN** (10/23/67); **CHRISTINA** (12/24/68); **JENNIFER** (2/5/70); **ELIZABETH** (11/9/71); **BILLY** (3/3/73); **EMILY** (11/12/74); **MARK** (7/6/76); **REBECCA** (5/16/78); **MELISSA** (7/2/80); **TIM** (7/21/82); **HILARY** (7/5/84); **SARAH** (7/4/86); **KATIE** (7/23/88); **MOLLY** (8/8/90); **T.J.** (4/13/93).

Ann's house always seems more in place than mine," says Chris Wiseman, a Thiebault friend.

Another thing to be amazed at is that the house the Thiebaults have lived in since 1975 covers less than 2,000 square feet.

"It's funny — the people who sold us the house were moving out because it didn't have enough room for them. They had four kids. We were moving in and we had six at the time," says Thiebault, who guesses that, at its packed-like-a-sausage peak, the house housed 10 Thiebault kids. The number has shrunk to eight, and it will be reduced by one more when Rebecca, 19, heads for college in August.

Considering that it came with only four bedrooms (and room for two more in the basement, although one of those subterranean bed rooms is part of a family room), the house has always required a doubling up of sleeping



Molly Thiebault can barely keep graduation excitement under her hat.

more time together? Sure. Do I feel guilty about not spending more time with my kids? Oh yes. But I think most parents feel that way at one time or another. Each family has to figure out what 'enough' time means and how to make it work. In that respect, we're no different from regular families."

Scant minutes after saying this, Rebecca reminds Thiebault that he has promised to attend her high school awards ceremony that night. Which also happens to be the night of a political dinner at which he will be the guest of honor.

Thiebault, who has clearly forgotten Rebecca's ceremony, doesn't bat an eye. When his daughter is out of earshot, he tells a visitor: "I'll make it to both. I'll make an appearance at the dinner, then I'll head to the school."



Thiebault and daughter Katie, 8, embrace at a school function for another family member.

Left: Molly Thiebault, 6, and brother T.J., 4, join Dad for an emergency milk run.

scheduled time, you wait. (And wait.) Of course, even if you don't miss your time and you happen to be one of the younger Thiebauls, chances are you're no stranger to lukewarm showers.

"We tried to buy the biggest water heater we could," Thiebault says. "But it's still totally inadequate."

Way beyond adequate, on the other hand, is the Thiebauls' *serious* back yard. One of the prime reasons Thiebault bought the house, the back yard easily accommodates a huge trampoline, a swing set, a soccer net, eight bicycles, Mary Ann's flower beds and the massive elm tree — to say nothing of the usual sprawling, teeming mass of Thiebault kids and their friends.

Although Thiebault takes pains to join in the play activity as often as he can, he acknowledges that his one-on-one time with each of his kids is less than he would like.

"They *all* need lots of love, lots of time; it's hard to balance," he says. "Could we spend

Meshing his professional obligations with his kids' individual needs may be a high-wire act at times, but Thiebault makes no apologies.

"It's important for my kids to see that I'm committed to more than just our family," he says. "By being at the legislature, I hope I'm showing them that it's important to reach out and do for others in our community, our state, our nation."

Thiebault, an unbending Democrat ("I'm not sure we'd allow any Republicans in this family"), has been a member of the Colorado legislature since 1986, when he was elected state representative. In 1993, he filled the Senate vacancy for District 3. A year later, he won his own four-year term. Today, he serves as that chamber's assistant minority leader.

And few legislators are better-prepared when it comes to knowing the ins and outs of legislation.

"I don't know too many people who put the time and effort into reading every piece of legislation, but I bet Bill does," Wiseman says. "If you want to know something about a bill, ask him. Chances are he's read it. He can also sling a lot of paper your way; he writes things down and saves them. He's very organized."

But even a meticulously organized legislator can be a bit scattered when it comes to some of the details of his 15 kids. For instance, sounding slightly chagrined, Thiebault admits, "I get all messed up with the actual birth dates



Thiebauls. You're sure to find lots of bunk beds here — you just can't be sure *whom* you'll find in them.

"There's lots of friendships that develop between the different brothers and sisters, and it's really interesting to watch that," Thiebault says. For instance, Hilary, 12, and T.J., 4, love to snuggle and may opt to share a bunk bed on occasion, even if they don't share a room. And while Rebecca and Melissa, 16, are close, they don't share a room. Molly, 6, generally rooms with Rebecca, while Melissa opts for the bed in the corner of the basement family room. ("Probably because she knows the others don't like it down there," her father says.)

Less fluid — but more vexing — than the sleeping arrangements is the issue of bathrooms. A quick peek into the home's "master bath" reveals a less-than-spacious room where no fewer than 16 ladies' razors are crammed into a cup on the tub and nine toothbrushes stand sentinel atop the sink. The downstairs bathroom is even more modest.

But it isn't lack of bathroom space that presents a problem. It's lack of bathrooms.

Ergo, bathroom time — especially in the morning — is determined by schedule. And schedule is determined by age. ("I get the first shower in the morning," Dad says, his voice authoritative and guilt-free.) If you miss your

DAD from 13D

of my kids."

And it isn't just birthdays that confuse Thiebault.

"Yeah, if I'm mad at one of them, I do sometimes forget their name," he says. "So I'll yell, 'Hey, you, whoever you are — get over here!'"

Even worse, however, "Sometimes I'll call one by the wrong name," he says. "They get very offended when that happens."

Of course, some of them are lucky to have names.

After the first dozen or so kids, Thiebault says, he and Mary Ann were sometimes bereft of inspiration on the moniker front. In fact, Molly, 6, left the hospital without a name.

"It took us a month to come up with one," Thiebault says. "We got several distressed phone calls from the hospital, asking us to please name her and come down and sign the birth certificate."

On the other hand, naming T.J. was a slam dunk.

"I'd always wanted to name a son after Thomas Jefferson," Thiebault says. So when his youngest child just happened to be born on the 250th birthday of our third president...

Naming his youngest (and, Thiebault insists, last) child after a statesman-politician made perfect sense for a guy who has never been loath to involve his family in the business of politics. Not only do the Thiebault kids help deliver their dad's campaign literature, but "even T.J. knows how to walk up to a door and get a vote," Dad says.

His extensive family is also good fodder for breaking the ice during a campaign speech. More than once, Thiebault has stood at the start of a political dinner, looked out at the assembled multitude and cracked, "This reminds me of dinner at my house."

But sometimes his stories aren't so funny.

Take the incident that occurred several Christmas Eves ago when a local restaurant refused to seat the Thiebaults because — holiday, shmoliday — management just didn't want to be bothered accommodating this army of a family.

"That was pretty disappointing," Thiebault says, shaking his head at the memory. "But I think going through that taught the kids something. They learned that some people treat others unfairly, based upon superficial values."

Disappointments aside, the Thiebault kids are pretty blasé about their prodigious number. Their attitude was summed up by Rebecca, who, when asked what it's like to be part of a humongous family, said offhandedly, "It's original."

Original thinking is something Thiebault tries to inspire in his kids, he says. Sure, every one of them is encouraged to attend college. "But not just to get a job," he says. "I want them to get knowledge. I always try to stress that an educated person is a better person. A job will follow."

And Thiebault practices what he preaches about thinking for oneself. After all, here's a Catholic guy who attended a high school run by Benedictine monks and has 15 kids — and

yet he is a staunch abortion-rights advocate.

"Yes, I believe in *Roe vs. Wade*," he says. "Although my wife and I have chosen to have a large family, that doesn't mean I want to impose our views on other people."

Understandably, this kind of stance hasn't endeared him to the political right. Then again, his 15 kids probably haven't made him the poster boy for Planned Parenthood, either.

Thiebault's reaction to vocal and veiled criticism of his extensive family is: "I take it with a grain of salt." Actually, he prefers to season his conversations with more positive stories about the people who have gone out of their way to show kindness to his many.

"Once, there were about 11 of us then, we borrowed a friend's Winnebago and drove to Disneyland," he says. "In my usual way of doing things, I didn't make reservations. So we showed up in Anaheim and went to a motel. I asked for two rooms, for two adults and nine kids."

"At first, the clerk was shocked; his eyes kind of rolled around in his head. But then he got this kind of glow about him. He wound up setting us up in a wonderful suite; even had a sunken bathtub. The kids thought we were in a palace."

Although he doesn't admit it, you get the feeling that sometimes Thiebault gets a kick out of seeing people's reaction upon being exposed to his brood. Take the time two years ago when his entire family (kids, spouses of kids, grandkids) coalesced in Las Vegas for a reunion. The first night, he went down to the hotel dining room, where, as usual, he had not made reservations.

"How many?" the unsuspecting hostess asked.

"Table for 32, please," Thiebault replied.

So what happened? Once the color returned to the woman's face, that is.

"I did what anybody would," Thiebault says. "Gave her a tip and we got seated."

It's these moments, moments when he's explaining that "we're sort of like any other family, except we're a little more overloaded," that Thiebault seems to relish most. He really doesn't see that much difference between his and other families.

And because he doesn't, he is reluctant to set himself up as any kind of paternal guru.

"My kids are very inspirational to be around," says the father of 15 and grandfather of four. "I've learned so much from them. Watching them blossom has been an incredible experience."

He sits back in a chair whose cracked leg has been tentatively repaired. He is quiet for a minute. But just as nature abhors a vacuum, the Thiebault house abhors silence. While the head of the household thinks, his thoughts are washed over by a cacophony of laughter, arguing, shouting and slamming doors.

Then he smiles. He knows what he wants to say.

"After you've been around my kids, you can walk into a dark room and there's light."

Make that a lot of light.

James Meadow is a staff writer for the News.