

A TALE OF Three Families

By Don L. Searle

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The three couples are diverse. One husband and wife were born in different European countries, immigrated to Australia with their families after World War II, and grew up around the corner from each other.

Another husband is a California native who served a mission in Australia, then met and married an Australian woman; after some years, they chose to make their home in the country of her birth. The third couple are Australian natives, reared in the Church with the tradition of serving.

Each of the three men has served as president of the Newcastle Australia Stake. Each of the women has also served in leadership capacities while a mother of young children. As couples and as individuals they have faced challenges. They could tell you that the Lord has strengthened them not simply in spite of their challenges, but *through* their challenges. They would not have sought either the leadership roles or the challenges, but they can testify that living obediently helped prepare them for when opportunities and trials came.



The experience of three Australian families represents what happens as the gospel spreads throughout the earth: individuals grow through obedience, and they, in turn, strengthen the Church in their area.

Peter and Genivive Barr

Peter Barr was born in Lithuania during World War II. Genivive was born in Germany, of Polish parentage, also during the war. Peter and Genivive are convinced it was the hand of the Lord that led both of their families to move half a world away in the late 1940s and settle in Newcastle, Australia.

The two young people first became aware of each other in their mid-teens, around 1960. About that same time, Genivive realized she was not finding answers in her family's church to questions about life and our existence on earth. But when two missionaries from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints knocked on her family's door, Genivive found her answers in what they taught.

Peter was drawn into the discussions. One day at home, he resolved to ask God in prayer whether the Book of Mormon is true. He had not fully framed the question in prayer when he received an answer so powerful that he was overcome and began to sob. All he could say, over and over, was, "Thank you, thank you."

Because of parental opposition, both Peter and Genivive had to wait to be baptized. Peter was 22 before he could join the Church, but in the meantime, he served in every way he could without being a member. The two were married when he was 23 and she was 21, civilly, as the law required, then sealed in the Hamilton New Zealand Temple.

Obedience to God was an important objective in Peter's life. Genivive recalls, "Peter was adamant that he wanted to do whatever the Lord wanted him to do—he wanted to be able to serve. He had chosen two scriptures as guides: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33), and "Choose you this day whom ye will serve; . . . but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15).

The Barrs know that the Lord took Peter at his word on his desire to serve.

Not long after their marriage, the opportunity came for Peter to buy a business in Toukley, about an hour from Newcastle, with the help of a partner. That men's clothing store supported the Barrs for 30 years—thriving even when the economy did not—while opportunities came for both of them to serve in the Church. Being the owner

*What is the reward for faithful obedience?
Three Australian couples have learned
that for them it is stronger faith and an
increased capacity to serve.*

of a business allowed Peter to control his own time.

At 26, he was called as a branch president, then later as bishop when the branch became a ward. He served as a stake president's counselor, then as a counselor to mission presidents, then as a stake president beginning in 1978. In 1980, when the Newcastle Australia Stake was created, he was called as its first president.

Church service was a sacrifice for young parents with a growing family. There were times when it was challenging, Peter recalls, "but never a woe-is-me challenge." Genivive says, "When Peter was at home, he was *at home*. We had him 110 percent." Peter expresses gratitude for his wife's contributions in mothering their four children and maintaining their home while she too served in the Church. They did not escape the challenges of tight budgets, illnesses, and children who sometimes did not make choices they approved of. Still, they were sustained in their service, and their temporal needs were met. "We were just blessed," Peter says.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MATT BARR

Above: Genivive and Peter Barr. Left: The Barrs and their family in a 2002 photo at a beach near their home.



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(Matthew 6:33).*

One time as he prepared to make the four and one half hour drive to Sydney (before the current freeway) for a leadership meeting, he realized the trip would use up most of the petrol (gasoline) he could afford for the week. When he reached Sydney, however, the indicator needle on the fuel gauge had barely moved. When he arrived home, it still showed almost three-quarters of a tank—ample for his needs. There was no way to explain what had happened, except that the Lord had blessed them.

When the time came that Peter and Genivive wanted to serve a mission for the Church, they put their business up for sale. There was no interest at first—and then a fire gutted the store, destroying everything. But the unbelievable happened—a buyer came forward, wanting to take over the business. The Barrs used insurance money to restore it to his liking.

As the Barrs were in the process of filling out mission applications, they were called to an interview with Elder Richard G. Scott of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, visiting in Australia, who advised them to hold their papers for a time. They obeyed, wondering what that meant. Finally, Peter received a call from President Thomas S. Monson, then First Counselor in the First Presidency. Peter was called to preside over the Baltic Mission—Latvia, Estonia, and his native Lithuania. The Barrs served there from 2002–2005.

As he visited with Lithuanian Saints, President Barr found some of the language he had learned as a little boy coming back. At times, he kept an interpreter close by. But sometimes he felt the gift of tongues as he taught gospel principles in Lithuanian, going far beyond the vocabulary of the six and one half year old he had been when he had left the land of his birth.

The Barrs say they were blessed in other ways while they served in the mission field, in accordance with a promise made by President Monson when Peter was called. The blessings included the return of one of their children to Church activity.

The Barrs returned home to continue doing what they love—serving. Peter is Bishop Barr again, presiding over the Toukley Ward. None of the challenges they have faced through the years have changed their feelings about giving their lives to the service of their God. Peter still expresses the same testimony he felt as a young man when he prepared to reorder his life so he could serve more fully: “If we do what the Lord wants, He will bless us.”

Through their service, many other lives have been blessed as well.

Jesse and Terri Little

When Jesse C. Little Jr. was called as a bishop, he knew he had a choice to make. He could not serve his family or his ward as he felt he should and still pursue his developing business as an independent contractor. It seemed wise to give up running his own business; instead, he would work as a plasterer for another company.

The Littles have lived to see how that choice blessed them and their family of eight children. It also allowed them to help in the growth of the Church in their area. Both have held a number of leadership callings through the years. Jesse served as the second president of the Newcastle Australia Stake, succeeding Peter Barr.

Their first four children were born in the United States, Jesse’s native country. With four children younger than three, the Littles made the practical decision to move to Australia, where Terri’s family could provide help. Jesse felt he could find work in Australia, and the move would offer a chance to serve in the Church among the people he had come to love as a missionary.

In Newcastle, Terri served for a number of years in the stake Young Women presidency, influencing girls who are now mothers rearing families of their own.

For the most part, the Littles’ children have found happiness in living the gospel as their parents taught them, though individual agency is as much at work in their family as in any other. How did they keep their children close to the Church? “I don’t think there’s a formula. You just do what the Brethren tell you,” Jesse says. Terri adds: “You have to put the gospel first.”



Above: Jesse and Terri Little.*

Right: The Littles with four of their sons, (from left) Isaac, Johnathon, Joshua, and Mark.



They adopted the philosophy, Jesse says, that, “We’re not raising children. We’re raising *leaders*.” He and his wife believed they were preparing future missionaries. “We felt that’s why they were sent to us.” Six of their eight children have served missions.

These days when “President Little” is introduced in stake meetings, it is their son Joshua who rises to speak. Joshua Little is now second counselor in the stake presidency. Not long ago, Jesse, a member of the high council, accompanied his son on a stake speaking assignment—as junior companion. At any given time, several of the Littles’ children or their spouses will be contributing in the Church by serving in stake or ward positions.

Terri recalls wondering one time if it was worthwhile to go on having family home evening. Some of the children resisted, sometimes they fought and often their attention wandered. But as Terri was wavering, one of her sons said to her, “Come on, Mom, are we going to have family home evening or not?” She realized that they had come to expect it, and she and her husband had a parental responsibility to carry on.



“Choose you this day whom ye will serve; . . . but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15).

Along with the usual commitments in rearing a family, there has been an unusual challenge in recent years: Terri’s stomach cancer. Her stomach had to be removed, and she had chemotherapy. Her view is that she can’t be sure what the future holds, but she is ready to accept the Lord’s will. Day by day, she takes advantage of every opportunity to enjoy her 18 grandchildren.

Because Jesse worked for the plastering company, his sons were able to work there as well and put aside money for their missions. Now, because of their experience, three of the Littles’ sons are operating a plastering business of their own.

The children say their parents have been examples of hard work, of living what they preached, of trying to live in harmony, and of generosity to those in need. One son says that although his parents have provided adequately for the family, material things have never been terribly important to them. Terri acknowledges that this is true. They deliberately lived with less so she could be at home with the children.

What they have has never been as important as the principles by which they live. Jesse says that when they have put the Lord first, they have always been supported spiritually, and they have never lacked for money when it was needed.

“We’ve never made any sacrifice for which we haven’t been more than repaid for our efforts.”

Ian and Bridget Leneham

Ian Leneham, current president of the Newcastle stake, learned early to follow spiritual impressions. He followed one of those when he moved to Newcastle, where his wife, Bridget, lived—even though at the time there were no promises or commitments between them.

He was called as a bishop at 29, then as stake president at 33—and when that call came, he had already received a strong impression as to whom his counselors should be.

Ian and Bridget were both taught in gospel-centered families and by faithful leaders to seek and follow the guidance of the Spirit. They are trying to pass on this legacy of faith, both in the home and in their Church service. The Lenehams recognize that the example of local leaders like the Barrs and the Littles teaches this important lesson: the service we give to others contributes to our individual growth. Bridget remembers being influenced by Terri Little as a teen in the Young Women program. Ian knows that earlier bishops and stake presidents helped build a base of strong membership that moves the Church forward now in their part of Australia.

The Newcastle stake is large—five and one half hours by free-way from one end to the other. How do President Leneham and his counselors administer its 11 units?

“We do the best we can,” he replies. “We are very blessed to have wonderfully faithful bishops and branch presidents. These great men, so diligently supported by their wives, are well equipped to lead their wards and branches. They are great shepherds, and they lovingly look after their flocks.”

As he meets with individuals, President Leneham follows counsel he once heard from Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles: never leave an interview without issuing the member a challenge to grow spiritually.

“My emphasis has always been to deepen discipleship,” President Leneham explains. He adds that there are inspiring examples in “members across the stake whose commitment to the gospel extends beyond a cultural conversion to a deeply held devotion. Their hearts are changed. This is evidenced by what they do and more particularly by who they are.”

In his own family, there is evidence that the Leneham children are learning principles their mother and father would want them to live. Their oldest child, Caleb, 12, has already read the



Above: Ian and Bridget Leneham.
Below: With their four children: (left to right)
Teagan, Tabitha, Caleb, and Corben.



Book of Mormon and received a testimony of his own. Tabitha, 10, already knows about the power of prayer. Once, her pet guinea pig was lost in the house and the entire family spread out to look for it. Tabitha went first to pray for help. The family quickly found her pet.

Ian Leneham says his family has been “abundantly blessed” in terms of material things. For parents in Australia, as in other prosperous countries, teaching children to be grateful can sometimes be a problem; too many people around them, enjoying comfortable, materially rich lives, seem to feel little need for God or faith. “We try always to remember the source of all our blessings,” he says. “Many times we have reflected on the particular blessing of having a home that provides a sanctuary from the storms of life.”

Bridget says she and her husband are doing all they can to help their children learn of Heavenly Father’s blessings. She would not send her children off to school in the morning without family prayer. Caleb and Tabitha are old enough to read the scriptures on their own; Bridget makes time to read scriptures with their daughter Teagan, 7, and son Corben, 4.

Building a strong family, like building the Church, means carefully putting in place a firm spiritual base, Bridget says. “For me, it’s just the daily things. It’s just living and breathing the gospel.”

The lives of the Barrs, the Littles, and the Lenehams illustrate how the Lord builds spiritual strength across generations, both in families and in local Church leadership. He works through individuals who have the faith to go forth daily “living and breathing the gospel.” ■

* Terri Little passed away as this article was being prepared for publication.