

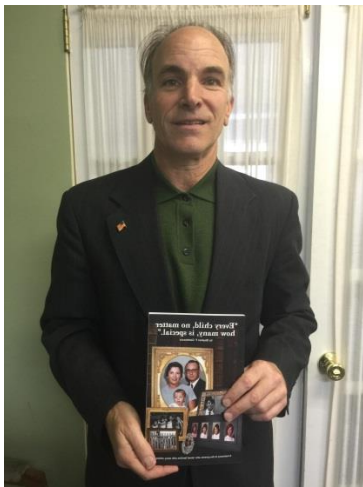
Delco man's new book shares his experience of growing up in family of 18 (Yes, you read that right!)

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Author Stephen F. Gambescia of Havertown is pictured holding his new book, "Every child, no matter how many, is special." The book shares experiences of the Gambescia family, paying tribute to Joseph and Mary Elizabeth Gambescia and how they raised their sixteen children. (Photo: Peg DeGrassa/ Digital First Media)

Cheaper By the Dozen, The Waltons, Jon and Kate Plus Eight, Nineteen Kids and Counting, Eight is Enough... Through the years, most people have watched TV shows and movies about large families, mostly with fascination, because they just couldn't imagine.

Havertown resident Stephen Gambescia can imagine and he is quick to point out that no TV show or movie has ever captured the true essence and character of the large family. He should know. The Drexel University healthcare professor is child number 12 of 16 children born to Dr. Joseph and Mary Elizabeth Gambescia.

In the new book he released last week, *Every child, no matter how many, is special*, Gambescia said he did something that no Hollywood producer could ever do. He tells the story through the eyes of the members of a large family and captures the profound blessings of growing up being a member of such a unique family unit. From schooling, vacationing, playing, celebrating holidays, and maintaining order, managing a larger-than-average family takes parents with outstanding dedication and wisdom. According to the author, he collaborated with his siblings to make sure he got it all right, because they wanted a book that could pay tribute not only to their remarkable parents, but to all the parents who raised families with many children. They wanted to honor them for their ingenuity, selfless sacrifice and faith, he explained.

“My book gives an authentic view of the big families. Hollywood, TV, and literature treat us as either institutional or Pollyannaish. We were neither. People often blurt out derogatory remarks to parents who have large families. I want to get rid of the stigma and show all the good things that come out of being from a large family,” Gambescia said in a recent interview. “I get asked all the time, ‘What was it like?’ so I decided to tell people what it was authentically like. This isn’t a book only about growing up Italian or growing up Catholic, although both of those factors were integral to our family. This book is the real deal on how our family lived and all the humor and chaos and love that made up who we are today.”

After marrying, Joseph and Mary Elizabeth Gambescia lived in South Philadelphia with Joseph’s parents while Joseph attended medical school. By the time the couple had two children, World War II had erupted and Joseph went off to serve with the U.S. Army Medical Corps in Germany. Joseph’s parents moved to School Lane in Upper Darby, taking Mary and her first two children with them. By the time the Gambescias were ready to move into a home of their own, they had five children.

Home from the war and starting his career as a doctor here, Joseph moved his family of seven to Bewley Road in Havertown, where the offspring expanded to 14. The family eventually moved to their final larger home in Bala Cynwyd, where two more little Gambescias were born, rounding out the number of Joseph and Mary’s children to 16. The couple contributed to the baby boom almost every year from 1945 to 1964, producing 16 healthy children in 19 years.

Author Stephen said he didn’t realize until he was an adult why his large family rarely got invited places. They always had the Fourth of July picnics, the holiday

dinners and the haunted houses at their home.

“Would you invite a family with 16 children over for a picnic or for a fancy Christmas dinner?” he chuckled.

Sons Joseph Jr., Gregory, Mark, Denis, Mario, Stephen and John and daughters Merri, Concetta, Frances Anne, Elisa, Angela, Margaret Mary, Marita, Susanne and Ann Marie made up a lively Gambescia household. Stories abound in this book, all told in short vignettes and most with a humorous undertone, rather than in the style of one straight, serious novel. Since all siblings contributed memories and had input about the book, the experience is remembered through many different perspectives.

Tales include how the family would pack up actual bed frames and mattresses into a pick-up truck, along with their suitcases, when they rented a place each summer at the shore, because rarely rentals had 16 beds. Other topics include the amazing orchestration of chores (“My parents were crafty and strategic in how they got us to do the laundry, Stephen explained), stowaway friends who weren’t noticed hiding out for a few days in the populated home, brothers who dated the same girlfriends and the Sunday in 1965 that the family made the front page of the Philadelphia Inquirer walking to church in the snow.

Stephen gives credit to his parents for running a tight ship and keeping all the details of each day running smoothly. The children attended St. Laurence and St. Mathias grade schools. The nine girls attended Merion Mercy Academy, three boys attended Saint Joe’s Prep, two attended Malvern Prep and two boys went to Archbishop Carroll High School. That was a lot of back-to-school nights and homework to oversee, Stephen remarked.

His parents were always dignified, and never raised their voices, never cursed and always had faith in humanity, he said.

“I never heard my parents say a disparaging word about an individual or a group of people—ever,” Stephen explained. “When things got out of hand, my parents would call for five minutes of ‘holy silence.’ We always carried a tradition of faith in our home. My dad would also call family meetings, which were run by gavel and agenda, and sometimes late-night emergency meetings, depending on the situation.”

He continued, "Ice cream was a luxury in our home. We were accustomed to having used football and sports equipment and hand-me-down clothing. We were always borrowing from each other. All of this built our character and bonded us as siblings."

Their mother graduated from Hahnemann Nursing School in 1943 and worked in her profession until she became a stay-at-home mom. Their dad was a well-respected physician who tended to Cardinal John Krol for 30 years. He was also a scientist who studied the Shroud of Turin and chairman of the department of medicine at St. Agnes Medical Center in Philadelphia from 1967 to 1989. The couple have left behind quite a legacy. The family now includes 32 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Joseph and Mary Elizabeth's children have served in the Army, Navy, Marines and Coast Guard. Their careers include union carpenter, college professor, nurse, bookkeeper, lawyer, occupational therapist and secretary. Others work in longterm care, rad tech and retail and for Acme, Citibank, TV Guide and the City of Philadelphia. All of the Gambescia clan is well educated. Stephen himself has almost enough initials after his name to equal an entire alphabet (PhD, MEd, MBA, MHum, and MCHES)..

According to Stephen, the Gambescia children are still very close today. Every quarter of the year, the extended family meets at a place for dinner, sometimes just a local steak or hoagie shop or down at Marra's Pizza in South Philly. The family also meets twice a year, Christmas week and Holy Saturday, for day trips. They may go to Longwood Gardens or to view the Center City holiday displays in December and to Lancaster or another destination in the spring.

None of the original Gambescia children have more than four children. Author Stephen and his wife Susan have two children, Stephanie Seal of Drexel Hill and Stephen Gambescia of Havertown and a six year old grandson Kellen.

"This book, through the eyes of our family, shows how big families like ours functioned from the multiplicity of everyday events to the signature life events of a family. Those who grew up in big families will recognize many scenarios in this book; those who did not will be treated in humorous detail to large-size family dynamics, which any size family will enjoy," Gambescia remarked. "For as our

mother always said, 'A family is a family whether there is one child or sixteen children. Every child is special.'"

(*Every child, no matter how many, is special* by Stephen E. Gambescia is available at Amazon.com and in select area book stores and other locations.)

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