



Hockey season — across the nation “normal” family life means scrambling to get kids to and from the rink, flogging raffle tickets and hauling gear on weekend road trips. Meet a Penticton hockey family



Home Game

by Dawn Renaud
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(PAGE 42 FAMILY PHOTO) CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: RHONDA ERHARDT, REUBEN ERHARDT, BILLET LUKE CURADI, KALEN ERHARDT, CARSON ERHARDT AND ELISA ERHARDT

CROWDED HOCKEY SCHEDULES SOMETIMES MEAN TAKE-OUT'S ON THE MENU AT THE ERHARDT'S

HOCKEY MOM RHONDA ERHARDT WEARS MANY HATS: CHEERLEADER, FUNDRAISER, ORGANIZER

It's almost 5 p.m. when Reuben Erhardt arrives at Penticton's Memorial Arena with his kids Carson and Elisa. They head straight to the change rooms, where Reuben helps six-year-old Elisa into her gear. Carson, age 10, goes off in search of his friends. Elisa's anxious to hit the ice, but Reuben wants to re-tape her stick; he sends her to the fountain to fill her water bottle while he rummages through her equipment bag, finally spotting the bright pink roll. Elisa looks for the lid to her bottle and he nods to where it sits atop the bag while expertly winding tape around the blade. The moment Elisa has her stick she's out the door; Reuben's pulling on his own skates and helmet. "Running a bit late?" I ask. An hour of helping Carson with homework, he explains, then getting supper started—meat sauce for the spaghetti. He pulls on his helmet. Heading through the gate, he spots Carson near the glass with a couple of friends and reminds him to get over to the community rink in time for his own practice. Dad glides onto the ice to help Elisa's pre-novice team practice their skills.



Half an hour later, Carson has zipped across the parking lot to the community rink and he's gearing up with his Atom Development team. Minutes later his mom, Rhonda, arrives from work (she stopped first at Memorial just in case Carson was still there). She sets up station atop the lid of a large garbage can: no parents will get to the change room without seeing her. More importantly, she'll see them. Rhonda

is team manager and today she's collecting ticket stubs and money before the early bird fundraising draw deadline. Nobody crosses onto the rubber mat without handing them over. Bags of cash and stubs change hands. "You sold all four books?" she asks, excited, recording names, number of stubs, cash turned in. She checks her list, makes a call or two on her cell.

Gear on, Carson marches past. It's 6 p.m.; the Zamboni is scooting over the rink. An extraordinarily tall young man stops to talk to Rhonda. "Still three more to collect from," she tells him. "Could you please go to Memorial and get Elisa?"

Turning to me, she explains. "That was our billet, Luke. He's just finished his own practice (Penticton Vees) on the big rink next door at the South Okanagan Event Centre.

In theory, the Erhardts' schedule sounds busy. In practice, it's dizzying.

MEET THE TEAM

My first encounter with the Erhardts took place at their home on a Tuesday afternoon. Following Reuben's directions, I spot the house with the boarded-up bay window (home improvement snag).

Reuben greets me at the door. Up a half flight of stairs Rhonda is in the kitchen putting the finishing touches on a birthday cake for Elisa who has just turned six. She squeezes out the final letters, and then we settle at the dining room table to talk hockey.

It's a pretty big subject in the Erhardt home. In addition to helping with Elisa's team, Reuben acts as assistant coach for Carson's team. Their third child, 12-year-old Kalen has "retired" after playing last season as a pee wee, but now officiates for the Atoms House league. And for the past seven years, the family has also included an "adopted" son; their current billet, Luke Curadi, plays defense for the Vees.

How do they manage? "You just do it," says Rhonda calmly.



“They get a lot of life lessons from being involved... structure, discipline, other people counting on you.”

Tuesday is her day off; she's a full-time stylist at Flhair. Reuben's day usually starts at 4:45 in the morning. He takes the early shift at Starbucks, which works out well because it allows him to be home by the time the kids finish school. "When you've got to take them to skating or hockey or whatever, he's available," says Rhonda.

Fortunately, the rest of the family doesn't have to deal with a lot of early mornings. When Carson was in novice some of his practices were at 6 a.m. on weekends. He still has a 6:30 a.m. practice once every second week, but most are weekday evenings. (Thursday Rhonda works until 9 p.m., so Reuben manages it all himself.)

Weekends are crowded with fundraisers and tournaments. While the family generally travels together to out-of-town events, they occasionally end up in two

KALEN ERHARDT'S SIBLINGS CLAIM HE RACKED UP A FEW PENALTY MINUTES AS A PLAYER. NOW HE SEES THE GAME FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WHISTLE



“Carson is quite intent on making it to the NHL”

different communities for the weekend. That happens more often with older children, Reuben says. The younger teams like Elisa's aren't as heavily scheduled.

Elisa started playing when she was three, before the Penticton girls' program was organized so she'll stay with a predominantly boys' team for now. Rhonda says that once the girls' program gets off the ground, Elisa can choose where she wants to play.

Carson is quite intent on making it to the NHL, but older brother Kalen has taken a different direction this year: karate. “He never had a strong love for hockey,” says Reuben. “When they're younger they kind of go along with it, but as they get older they start thinking for themselves.” The Erhardts told Kalen that if he'd rather not play hockey, he would need to choose something else.

“I think they get a lot of life lessons from being involved in a sport,” says Rhonda, “structure, discipline, other people counting on you.”

BIG INVESTMENT

Had Kalen decided to continue, his parents would certainly have supported his decision, but they admit that having one less child involved in minor hockey does help the bottom line.

It's an expensive sport, and as the children move up the leagues it doesn't get any cheaper. Although the rest of the equipment gets passed down, everyone needs a new pair of skates each year—and that's just the beginning. There are also league fees, tournament fees and the cost of traveling and staying out of town. Reuben says some people have done the math, and he's heard estimates of \$3,000 per child.

“I don't think I'd want to add it all up,” says Rhonda, noting that even with all the fundraising they do—bottle

drives; raffles; hot dog, cookie dough and bulk meat sales—“it would be better if there was a money tree in the backyard.”

The family can seldom afford a vacation (instead, they think of out-of-town tournaments as mini-vacations) and there's neither the money nor the time to check out other winter sports like downhill skiing.

When hockey wraps up the family is involved with minor ball. By summer, Rhonda says, they're happy to spend some unscheduled time hitting the beach before hockey season rolls around again. Still, they don't see it as making sacrifices; hockey is a lifestyle choice the Erhardts have been happy to embrace.

REALITY CHECK

Reuben and Rhonda grew up in small Saskatchewan communities, where the public arena had a much different presence. A trip “back home” a couple of years ago underscored how accessible and inclusive a community rink can be.

Fees for use aren't as high, which helps the kids get more ice time, and there's also a different attitude toward how the ice is used. There, the centre line forms an imaginary barrier, with shinny on one half and public skating on the other. Everyone on both sides cooperates, looking out for the little ones and each other. “It's very relaxed,” says Rhonda. “Everyone's having fun.”

Here, liability concerns seem to be taking a lot of the fun out of it; even skating backward is no longer allowed. And while minor hockey is a focal



point for many a small prairie town, in larger centres it's just another organization vying for community's support when it comes to keeping ice fees down, fundraising and putting spectators in seats.

The Erhardts are similarly realistic about minor hockey itself. “Everybody that's involved with minor hockey volunteers,” says Rhonda, and that means some years you have plenty of good volunteers; other years people are burnt out or maybe there just aren't enough. They take it all in stride, seeing their own involvement as an investment not only for their own children but for the community as a whole.

They believe modelling volunteerism is important, and it's part of the reason they take in billets. As a host family they get a little extra income along with tickets to Vees home games, but those aren't the only benefits. “I like the dynamic of having an older kid in the house as well as the younger ones,” says Rhonda. “It doesn't take very long and they just become part of the family.” But are there any of the problems that usually go along with having a teenager in the house?

“Problems are rare at that level,” says Reuben, explaining that these kids are motivated, focused on achieving scholarships and furthering their careers. Luke graduated last year and is picking up a calculus class at Penticton Secondary; the high school works with the team to accommodate the players' busy schedules.

INTO OVERTIME

At Memorial Arena, it's just after 6 p.m. Another parent stops by to hand in his fundraising tickets to Rhonda, still perched on her garbage bin. Elisa bounces into the lobby, much more energetic than she has any right to be after an hour on the ice. “She's always like that,” says Rhonda.

Reuben and Luke are right behind her. Luke settles onto a stair to wait for Rhonda to finish up while

Reuben gets his skates back on and joins Carson's team on the ice.

Rhonda has one last parent to collect from. She marches off to the change room to track him down, returning victorious a few minutes later. Now, she says, “I get to go home and count.”

It's 6:13. Time to take Luke and Elisa home, get the spaghetti on, tackle some homework—just an ordinary day in the life of a hockey family. **OL**

GROWING UP WITH HOCKEY: SIX-YEAR-OLD ELISA ERHARDT'S FAMILY HAS INCLUDED EXTRA BIG BROTHERS (PENTICTON VEES) SINCE THE DAY SHE WAS BORN

HOCKEY NIGHT IN PENTICTON. CARSON ERHARDT CHEERS THE HOMETOWN VEES AS THEY HIT THE ICE. LIKE THEM, HE HOPES TO MAKE IT TO THE NHL