Special family, special love

Written by Maryangela Layman Román, Catholic Herald Family Staff Thursday, 27 September 2012 10:24

His Divine Savior Holy Angels ruggers might hold a commanding lead over their opposition, but you’d never guess it from the way head Coach John Klein paces the sideline, bellowing advice to his squad, loudly critical of any mistakes he spots. Family photos abound in Geraldine and Rudy Klein’s southside apartment, including this family portrait which hangs prominently in their living room, taken when young John was about 7 years old. Also pictured are Rudy, Geraldine and John’s older sister, Marie. (Submitted photo)

“What are you doing?” “Can we hang onto the ball? “Why would you do that?”

He expects all-out effort no matter the score and pushes his DSHA players to exceed expectations on and off the rugby field.

You see, Klein grew up in a household where challenges were evident, but exceeding expectations was second nature.

There’s no challenge that can’t be overcome with hard work, determination and teamwork preaches the 36-year-old Klein who learned that lesson firsthand from his parents, Rudolph and Geraldine Klein.

Both cognitively disabled and unable to read, write or drive, few would have expected the couple to marry, much less maintain a household and raise two children. Yet, they did just that; Rudy holding down a job as an orderly at St. Camillus for 21 years to provide for the family.

It wasn’t fancy; in fact the family lived in a tough neighborhood on Milwaukee’s north side, but Rudy and Geraldine created a safe, loving home for young John and his sister Marie, nine months his senior and also cognitively disabled.

“My parents and my sister will never get the opportunities I have received in life,” wrote Klein in an email to his team last year. “I feel this strong sense of responsibility to make sure they know I am doing as much as I can with this
opportunity I have been so fortunate and blessed to have.”

**He’s coach, teacher, family man**

To make most of the opportunity, Klein teaches special education at Oak Creek High School, pushing his students to be the best they can, has coached rugby at DSHA since 1998, 12 of those years as head coach, instructing the girls not only in the game of rugby, but daily dishing up life lessons, serving as a mentor to many. In addition to caring for his wife Katie, 34, and their two young children, Clara, 5, and Luke, 2, Klein is a main caretaker for his parents who live in assisted living on Milwaukee’s south side and Marie who lives in a group home in Cudahy.

“I have this thing where I want to do the most for my parents,” he said in an interview with your Catholic Herald in his Muskego home in late August. “I appreciate the opportunity because my sister could easily have been me and I could easily be my sister. I appreciate I have been given these gifts and I try to maximize these gifts. It’s a big deal for me to do the most I can for as many people as I can.”

For his efforts, Klein was honored on Monday, Sept. 24 by Life Navigators, an organization that aims to improve the quality of life for individuals with developmental disabilities

It wasn’t until he was about 7 or 8 years old that Klein realized his family was different than others. For example, he noticed his peers didn’t have to read the mail to their parents or help them figure out bills.

“It’s hard to put into words. I think growing up you don’t recognize your family is different because it’s family and that is all you know,” he said of his parents who met while taking a reading class at Milwaukee Area Technical College.

“Even though I had extra responsibilities, I did not see it as an extra burden,” he said. “It wasn’t until I started high school that I started to recognize that I got a different, unique situation. Initially, I was a little scared, shocked, intimidated that other people would recognize this and not want to befriend me, but eventually it’s become something I am very proud of. They are amazing people despite their disabilities,” he said.

**Love at first sight**

“I met her and I loved her, that’s what,” explained Rudy of his first meeting with his eventual wife. Soon after, Rudy presented her with a ring at Christmas time and the couple married June 16, 1973.

John “Chin” Klein works with members of the Divine Savior Holy Angels High School rugby team during practice at Dretzka Park, Milwaukee, on Monday, Aug. 27. More photos can be viewed and purchased at photos.chnonline.org. (Catholic Herald photo by Ernie Mastroianni)

They lived a few houses away from Geraldine’s sister in an apartment on 37th and Cherry streets.
Marie arrived first in November 1974, and according to Geraldine, “I fooled them all. Nobody told me I could get pregnant, they told me my body was too small.”

The following year, their son John was born – Rudy still remembers the time: 2:30 in the morning on Oct. 2.

**Big Brother expands his world**

When John was about 7, Geraldine, realizing her son needed more than what the family could provide, turned to the Big Brothers Big Sisters program.

A few miles away at Marquette University, senior John M. Clair was wandering through the library when he was stopped by a Big Brothers Big Sisters representative who had set up an information table.

“I tried to shy away from it,” admitted Clair, “due to lack of time and funds, but somebody said, throw your name in the hat and if we think there’s a good fit, we’ll let you know and lo and behold, I was matched with Johnny.”

That match not only led to a lifelong friendship, but opened Klein’s eyes to a world of possibilities.

Clair was told his young match had unusual circumstances in that he had two loving parents, but both his parents and only sibling were cognitively challenged so they thought it wise to get him some outside exposure.

Knowing that, Clair expected to meet a shy, reserved little boy.

“He was anything but,” recalled Clair, now 50, an attorney with Clair Law Offices, Delavan, and member of St. Andrew Parish, Delavan. “By all accounts, he was smart as a whip, wise beyond his years and I was not there more than two minutes when I was getting grilled by Johnny about every sports statistic possible.

“How he knew those stats I don’t know because I highly doubt his parents subscribed to the newspaper, but he knew every statistic about every sport. I think I came across as a total bust of a Big Brother and Johnny made it quite clear I did not know much about much if I didn’t know these stats.”

Nevertheless, the relationship lasted and throughout Clair’s years at Marquette, including three in law school, they hung out weekly.

**Outings were slice of university life**

“Our outings were probably not as fancy as most,” admitted Clair, noting he was on a student’s limited budget. “I’d typically pick the kid up, go to the rec center where a bunch of us would get
together and play basketball – and we made him watch more than anything – but it was a different outlet; he got to see university life and how other people lived.”

Clair recalled the irony of the youngster coming to him at times with financial questions.

“Occasionally, Johnny had questions for me, and it was a funny thing, as there I am in college with a summer job and my dad filled out my income tax forms for me, but here was this little 9-year-old figuring out what had to be paid,” said Clair.

With no shortage of confidence, young Klein told Clair more than once that he would be going to a school for the gifted and talented. “Do you know why?” Clair remembers Klein saying, “because I am gifted and talented.’ He had that kind of confidence at a young age.”

Yet Clair saw a different possibility for him: Marquette University High School and he pushed his Little Brother to apply. Getting accepted at the school was the easy part for Klein, admitted Clair; paying for the private education was another challenge.

John “Chin” Klein, pictured during a recent DSHA rugby practice was named the 2008 USA rugby coach of the year. During his tenure at DSHA, the team has won six national titles. (Catholic Herald photo by Ernie Mastroianni)

This time, Clair, with the help of a few Jesuit priests, found the answer in a donor who stepped forward to cover the costs. His name: local attorney Patrick O. Dunphy of Cannon and Dunphy who told your Catholic Herald that Klein “is proof that when you combine determination with opportunity, the entire community benefits.”

While Dunphy covered tuition, Rudy proudly noted that he paid his son’s book fees.

“I went to a public high school,” admitted Clair, who attended Delavan High School, Delavan, “but I knew that kind of school would be a real gift for a kid in Johnny’s circumstance. Going to MUHS would not just give him some rigorous academics, but it helped shorten the window in time where he went from an insecure adolescent kid to the point where he was comfortable in his own skin and where people respected him for handling the challenges in his life the way he did.”

MUHS exposed Klein to yet another world, one of affluence.

“I felt prepared educationally; I did not feel overmatched at all,” he said of his introduction to MUHS, “but immediately you notice the competition and see a lot more money than what you knew growing up. It exposed me to a whole new world.”

While he said it motivated him to achieve more in his life, it also made him uncomfortable at first.
He recalled sitting in a freshman class where the students had to go around the room and introduce themselves and say what their parents did for a living.

“Most of the parents had professional careers that were very profound so when it got to me, I did not know what to say … so I lied,” admitted Klein. “I said my mom was owner of her own business, a day care, and my dad was a janitor. I did not give them incredible professions, but I didn’t want to say they were not working and that we were living on welfare.”

As time went on, Klein said he opened up to his friends about his family situation and his MUHS friends are some of his closest buddies today.

From MUHS, Klein set his sights on Marquette University, knowing he needed to stay in the area to help care for his family.

This decision, however, caused him to butt heads with Rudy, who could not understand why he would go to college before having the money to pay for it.

“My dad wanted me to work. He’s from the old school where he thought I needed to work and save money. Like my dad didn’t want me to go to college, he wanted me to stay and work and work and work until I could pay for college. I obviously knew different, but it was hard to have support be so anti what your decision making process is, but you know that you know better and you have to do it as best as you can.”

‘Four big breaks in life’

Clair, however, continued to be a guiding influence in Klein’s life, even after finishing law school and moving out of the area.

“In retrospect, I think Johnny had four really big breaks,” said Clair. “The first was being from a loving household, where his parents did what they could; secondly, the way he chooses to live life; none of us would never know he’s ever had a bad day in his life, he’s a glass is half full kind of kid who is genuinely fun to be around, he’s a friend of mine today and is very genuine.”

Clair described the third break of Klein’s life as the opportunity to go to MUHS, and the fourth was meeting Katie, his wife.

“Look at how much in love they are, and how she’s taken on a lot. John was always forthcoming about that and all the things they worried about when they decided to have a family, wondering what will our kids be like, but Katie is a saint,” said Clair, noting that when the couple married, Katie asked Marie to be one of her bridesmaids and that Gerry has formed a very special friendship with Katie’s mother, Pat Banach. His family is his heart and his inspiration, according to John Klein. Pictured above are Rudolph, left to right, John, Geraldine and Marie. (Catholic Herald photo by Juan C. Medina)
The couple met while both were students at Marquette University. Katie’s roommate was Klein’s cousin and while they met during Katie’s sophomore year, they didn’t start dating until her senior year.

**First shopping trip eye-opening**

While she can’t recall her first meeting with Klein’s family, Katie remembers her first shopping trip with Marie and Gerry.

Her former roommate, Klein’s cousin, was getting married, and Katie was asked to take them shopping for a shower gift.

“I had no idea what they could spend, what to buy, what was appropriate. John had not given me a budget, but his mom and sister wanted to buy everything,” she said, realizing for the first time what different backgrounds they came from. “In my family, I always ask my parents for advice,” she said, noting in the Klein family, it’s the other way around.

The relationship went through ups and downs, and even a breakup before they married in 2004.

Katie said Klein initially didn’t want a serious relationship and kept his distance.

“He never intended to get married,” she explained, because he was concerned that he didn’t want to put the responsibility of his family onto anyone and he was afraid of having kids, but I was very determined,” she said of the man she describes as a wonderful father who appears rough and tough on the outside, but inside is soft-hearted.

“When I started dating Katie, I had no plans of getting married because of the responsibilities I have in life. I didn’t think it was fair to bring anybody into that situation to have to deal with those responsibilities, but I have a wonderful wife who would not take no for an answer,” Klein said.

**Home life grounded in faith**

Faith is another lesson Klein learned at home, through the example of his parents who were longtime members of the former St. Thomas Parish on Milwaukee’s north side and Blessed Sacrament Parish when they moved to the south side. Klein and Katie attend St. Mary Parish, Hales Corners, and St. Martin of Tours, Franklin.

“My dad is a very faithful man and I know he is part of the reason I have faith. I’d see him say the rosary every night along with EWTN on the TV; he’s a very religious man,” said Klein, who said his own faith guides him to help others. “I feel very much that I am here for a reason, and that’s to take care of my parents and sister and make sure they are OK.”

Katie believes Klein’s faith and morals helped keep him out of trouble in the neighborhood and have influenced him throughout.
“Faith helped him be a good person, to follow more what Jesus would do. Definitely he’s a person of faith more than a lot of people our age where faith is secondary in their lives. He’s a better example than some of us,” she said of the man who prays each night with daughter, Clara.

**Players meet parents**

Klein’s positive approach to life and challenges is not lost on his rugby players. Over the years, he has not only talked to his players about his home life, but he brings his parents to games occasionally to let the girls meet them. It’s getting a bit more difficult as both Rudy, 84 and Gerry, 69, use walkers, but he said he wants the girls to see life from a different perspective.

“I brought my parents to a game this past spring in the hope of trying to help them understand just how much sacrifice on my own personal life. I have my own family here, I have a profession and I have to take care of my parents and my sister. Managing all that and coaching is a lot of time and I want them to know when they hesitate to make certain sacrifices, I am right there with them sacrificing,” he said.

That lesson was not lost on former player Shelley Frank, who just completed her doctorate in psychology.

Klein – known to his players as “Chin” because of his strong jaw line – was not married when Frank played rugby for him, but she knew he had a lot of family responsibilities.

“He’d often take calls from his sister during practice or maybe a game and we knew he had a lot of responsibilities at home,” she recalled of the man she called her mentor, describing him as a gentle giant with a loud bark. “He’s playful, but you know when he means business,” she said.

The teenage years were a challenging time for her, Frank said, but rugby gave her something to feel passionate about and Klein was a big part of that.

“He has just a joy for life and passion for life and I think it’s contagious,” she said. “I was able to confide in him about problems I was having at the time both on and off the field and I was able to find a source of support and understanding in him. I could talk to him about anything and he would always listen and give good advice.”

She said as she got to know Klein and know more about his life, she felt inspired to do her best.

“If he can do it and go through the trials and tribulations he did and use it as fuel to be a success in his own life and also give back to the community, I could too. He’s empowering without even having to say anything,” she said in a telephone interview with Catholic Herald Family.

Klein forms a relationship with each player on the team, said Frank.

“It’s hard to meet Chin and not have a reaction to him. He really loves the sport of rugby and tried to foster that love in others, but not only foster a love for rugby but a belief in building confidence and empowering youth,” she said.
Nothing her son can’t do

That sense of confidence and determination may have come in part from Gerry who believes there’s nothing her son can’t do.

“I had all the faith in the world my son is going to make something of himself,” she said, the pride evident on her face. “If my son puts himself down to it, he can do it. On the day he graduated, he said, Mom, this is what I did for you.”

And recently, Gerry said she got a taste of what Klein has meant to so many others. She and Katie were at a rugby game and she saw a rugby shirt she wanted. She told the vendor that her son would pay for the shirt.

“And he asked me, ‘Who is your son?’ I said, ‘John Klein,’ and he said, ‘I know your son. We all love him.’ That made me feel really good,”

Every conversation with his mother ends with “I love you,” said Klein, who called his family “my heart, my inspiration.”

Had he taken a “why me approach,” he said he would have never gotten as far as he has in life.

“I accept the responsibilities that come with it and make the most of it and now I think it’s a tremendous blessing. I see it as I have a wonderful opportunity to see life from a different perspective and I see how important it is to take advantage of opportunities you are given.

“I don’t know anyone like me. I’ve never heard of anyone like me, but I never say why is it me, or woe is me. I appreciate it, and think it has helped make me the person I’ve become,” said Klein.