



Erin and Gabriel Verret and their sons Brayden and Kagen make sure to keep a good routine at home

# *Katy's Oil Families*

Staying connected and strong during cross-country moves, offshore jobs, and unexpected trips overseas

*Written by Natalie Cook Clark | Photography by Marisa Hugonnett*

Life in the oil business is anything but typical, and at times, it can take you away from home. With Katy neighboring Houston and a plethora of oil companies, many Katyites find themselves with unusual work schedules in the oil field. Such a career involves the entire family working together as a team. While one parent works diligently offshore or overseas, another often holds down the fort at home, making sure the kids are happy and healthy. In between their busy schedules, these Katyites make it a priority to connect as a family.

### *Family Traditions and Routines*

Erin Verret's husband, Gabriel works for Schlumberger. His job has resulted in much time out on the oil rig, away from his family and now some late nights at the office. "When he was working offshore on an oilrig - meaning that he had a schedule of 14 days on, 14 days off - I made sure that I kept a good routine going in our house," says Erin.

With two sons, Kagen, 4, and Brayden, 2, routine is always key to a happy household. "Now that he is home every night, I have more of a set routine," she says. The Verrets stick to their family traditions, like Sunday drives after church, that allow them to spend quality time together.

When Gabriel maintained an offshore schedule, one of the biggest challenges for Erin was taking care of important things in his absence, when she had the boys to herself. It was also difficult to see her sons get upset when they wanted their dad.

She admits that living away from your husband is difficult, even if you know it is because of a steady and reliable job. "It is stressful at times being an oil wife, especially an oilrig wife, but I take pride in what my husband does," says Erin. When Gabriel was away, they made sure to keep in good communication, spending time talking by Yahoo messenger and Skype. "Just like we keep our tradition of a Sunday drive, we make sure that we make time to spend together," explains Erin.

### *Staying in Touch with Technology*

While the Verrets' schedule may be somewhat normal now, the Cooke family of Katy is still experiencing difficult routines, despite a good job in the oil industry. This past year, Cory Cooke left his family on Christmas Day to return

to his job with Diamond Offshore Drilling, Inc. He is home every other month. "I have a lot of family support," explains his wife, Felicia Cooke. "I try to keep my kids (ages 2 and 8) involved in activities and on some sort of schedule. It doesn't always work, but we just go with the flow. We're very flexible!"

Being an oil family comes with a few challenges, but Felicia uses technology to help bridge the gap. "Sometimes, it's hard when one of the kids is having an issue with something, or I need to make a decision about something and he's not here to help me figure out a solution," says Felicia.

To work through situations and decisions, the Cookes make it a priority to communicate frequently with each other through email and other electronic means when they can't talk by phone. "I'm not going to lie - it's hard [at times]," shares Felicia. "It gives me a great respect for single moms. There's so much I have to do to keep the household running, and it's exhausting at times."

As challenging as this life can be for the wives, it is also difficult for the husbands that miss out on important events and milestones. "He's been home for two Christmases since my daughter was born, and she is 8," says Felicia. "We just have to compromise and celebrate holidays early or late."

### *Making Family Time a Priority*

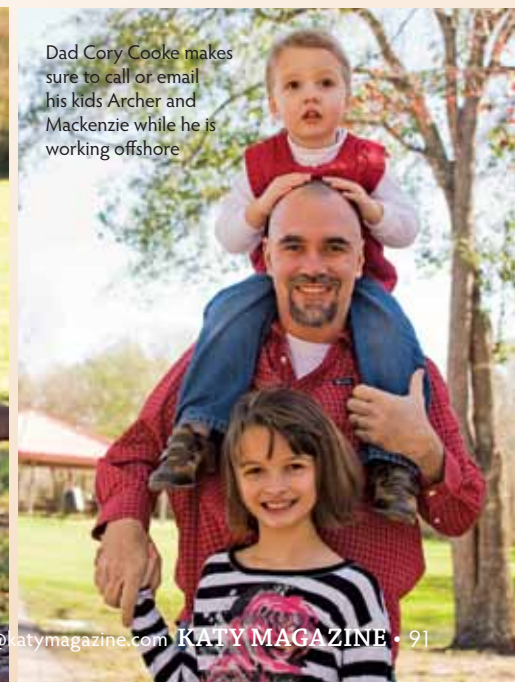
The oil industry has brought the Portells full circle and back to the Houston area where they call Katy home. Leila met Ralph, a petroleum engineer who went on to get his law degree, almost 30 years ago in Houston. Though his job has only caused him to work away from his family during moves, they have gained experience in that area. The Portells have lived in Houston, Dallas, Chicago, and Alaska, with Ralph having worked at Amoco and BP.

The Portells have two children, Katy and Eli, who are both in college now but experienced these moves with their family. "You will learn quickly in the oil business that most people don't stay in one place very long," shares Leila. "It is a very transient industry, but we loved meeting new people and were open to new challenges and adventures." As the Portells made the move from Anchorage to Katy, they found themselves living in four time zones, with both kids in college. "We all Skyped and talked daily," says Leila.

Felicia and Cory Cooke and their children Archer and Mackenzie



Dad Cory Cooke makes sure to call or email his kids Archer and Mackenzie while he is working offshore



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Leila and Ralph Portell and their kids Eli and Katy, who are both away at college, make sure to Skype and talk daily to keep in touch

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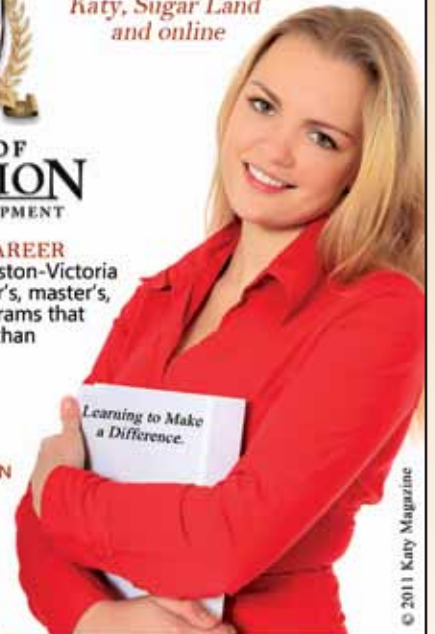


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“It is stressful at times being an oil wife, especially an oilrig wife, but I take pride in what my husband does.”

—Erin Verret

Just like the Verrets and the Cookes, family time has always been very important and crucial to keeping the Portells strong. “One thing we have done every year since our kids were young is make the time to take a family vacation,” Leila says. “It has taught the kids the value of family time.”

### Feeling at Home in a New Town

The Portell family’s biggest move was to Anchorage, AK when Katy was in high school and Eli was going into sixth grade. “That was quite an adventure,” recalls Leila. “The kids learned to love it.” While there, she connected with other oil families in her new town by joining the Anchorage Petroleum Wives Club. “I am told that these groups are all over the world, wherever oil wives are,” she shares. “It was a great way for me to meet other oil wives and a great resource.”

All moves are difficult, especially when moving to a city where you may have limited knowledge and know hardly anyone. Leila advises to try not to stress out too much, drink a glass of wine at night, and be sure to take time for you. “I have found that the companies really try to help you as much as they can,” she says. “The relocation specialists know what they are doing and can help you with every step of the move.”

### Healthy and Happy Families

Katy is booming with oil families keeping their families connected as one spouse works overseas or offshore. “I think it takes a certain type of person to be an oilfield wife,” says Felicia. The key ingredients for successfully raising a family and maintaining a marriage through these difficult schedules and moves are communication, flexibility, and making the most of every moment spent together as a family. **KM**

*NATALIE COOK CLARK enjoys freelance writing and sharing stories from her hometown of Katy.*



Despite their busy schedules, Ralph and Leila Portell make time every year to organize a family vacation.

## Tips from Katy's Oil Wives



**Erin Verret**

- Keep a set routine.
- Create traditions as a family.



**Felicia Cooke**

- Utilize family support.
- Communicate through technology.
- Compromise on special events.



**Leila Portell**

- Be open to the challenge and adventure.
- Join clubs and look for people experiencing the same thing.

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