

Jerome Dookie is an ordinary man with an extraordinary challenge

Nicole Joseph Dookie was born in Trinidad, in a Christian family. Moved by the example of her husband, Jerome Dookie, she was received into the Catholic Church in March 2002, and joined Opus Dei as a Supernumerary in October that same year. At about that time she was first diagnosed with cancer, which proved to be terminal. She prepared her children, who were still very

young – ranging from 3 to 11 – to accept her death serenely.

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Jerome Dookie is an ordinary man with an extraordinary challenge. Take one Saturday afternoon in mid-March, for instance. For many adults, the weekends provide an opportunity to revamp body and spirit before another five day spell at the office.

It is not so simple when, like Jerome, you are the sole parent of four children— the eldest, Gabrielle, is 10, and the youngest, Mikhail, just four. Jerome's wife, Nicole Joseph Dookie, died of breast cancer on July 27 2006.

Nicole's portrait takes pride of place in the living room of the Dookie's Cascade residence in St Ann's. The

two-storey house was her "pet project" and virtually every building block and coat of paint was chosen on her advice. But Jerome sees his wife's legacy best in the faces of their children. That Saturday, Jerome had scheduled a visit to the mall to purchase light fixtures. It is, for most, a mundane task better completed with haste and minimum fuss. Not in the Dookie residence, though.

Jerome's employment—he is a chartered accountant at Caribbean Nitrogen Limited, Couva—denies him daylight hours with his family during the week and he is anxious to compensate on weekends. Nicole was always anxious to maximize the time the family spent together.

So, when *Cancer Chat* stopped by to discuss bittersweet memories, Jerome had to graciously delay the Dookie family's departure. He

explained the relevance of his labour of love.

"Nicole insisted that her children's lives should not be affected by her illness," said Jerome. "That was her thrust really, that they should have a full life. There were times when I told her 'you are too ill and we are under a lot of stress so let us pass on this activity or this get together', but she would always insist that we should attend so that the children would not be deprived."

Mikhail, 4, climbed into his father's lap to observe the proceedings.

"Gabby, did you brush Mikhail's hair?" he enquires of his daughter, who was in her room.

Jesse, 5, wanted something to eat. Jerome apologized for the interruption to the interview as he headed into the kitchen and reemerged with a banana. Mikhail trailed him the entire time.

From a polite distance, Stephanie, 8, patrolled the living room—seemingly minding her own affairs. She only truly came to life later when the photographer showed up. Suddenly, the publication date of the *Cancer Chat* magazine took on new meaning for the photogenic eight-year-old.

"My wife was a saint," said Jerome. "I've told the children that mommy is in heaven now with Jesus and I tried to explain as much as possible the issue of body and soul." It is not hard to believe that the Dookie children will think—if they don't already—the same thing about their mild-mannered father who took sole responsibility for the family affairs after the untimely passing of their mother.

Nicole was just 39 when she died. She was diagnosed with stage three breast cancer in January 2004. More than three years later, the widower

still grapples with the shocking result. "It was something I could not have imagined happening," said Jerome. "When we got the diagnosis, you tend to be running around trying to get advice and to coordinate surgery and treatment and various things and you get caught up in that momentum.

"It was just a constant battle without much time to reflect on what was going on. We felt that either she would be cured or, if she had to die, it would be God's will and we would be able to accept it and deal with it however we could.

"When she was diagnosed as stage three, we knew it would be a fight to come back from that." He feels as though the grieving process has only just begun. Sometimes, it may be the familiar sight of a building that he frequented with Nicole. Or the flashback of an old joke might pull a

heartstring. "I am only now having some quiet time to reflect on what we and *she* went through to really appreciate it and understand it a bit better," he said. "I feel as if I am now having a chance to grieve and understand the level of suffering that she went through. Not just physically but the whole concept of having a terminal illness." There are brief moments when Jerome looks around the house that his wife designed—she chose the site, five years ago, and the family eventually moved in on June 24, 2006—and wonders if it is worth the effort.

"She had visions of what the house would be like," said Jerome. "On top of a hill with a great view... She was the one who visualized everything in terms of how the house would be laid out and the rooms and everything. Of course, I had some input but it was her pet project; her dream project. Many times, I told her

'look, let's not bother with this headache,' but she wouldn't hear that.

"Once she made up her mind about something, she would persevere and see it through." If Nicole's strength and dignified aura often inspired Jerome, it was her positivity—especially with the children—that left him in awe. He harbours fond memories of his late wife lightly explaining the intricacies of her disease to the young ones. A particularly poignant recollection is of Nicole and the children making a game of selecting the right wig after her own hair was sacrificed to chemotherapy.

"She was a fun-loving person," he said. "She had a great sense of humour and great faith in God... She had a real fighting spirit." Their faith and the support from friends and family were crucial to the survival of

the family during a trying period. "The most significant thing (for us) was having a lot of support from family and friends throughout the process," said Jerome, "and not trying to deal with it on our own but recognizing that we needed support. Don't be too proud to accept help and emotional support... I thought it was a tremendous resource for us."

"Our faith in God was important in keeping up the hope and trust that, even if things don't work out, it will be His will." Jerome no longer has his wife at his side—not in the flesh, at any rate. But he does not need to look far for inspiration.

He smiled as Stephanie posed for the camera and then got her siblings together for group photographs. The banana clearly did not satisfy Jesse. The four-year-old had a pack of Biskrem in hand and cheerily offered them around to other interested

parties. One got the impression that their trip to the mall would offer quite an entertaining afternoon. In any case, Jerome had more exciting plans for the subsequent weekend. He had scheduled a trip to Manzanilla beach. Jerome might miss his saint. But he surely owes her a huge debt of gratitude for his four angels.

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Nicole lived out her Christian vocation in a truly exemplary way, leaving to everyone who knew her, including her family who were not Catholic, an indelible memory of faith with deeds, total abandonment to God and joyful detachment... She died on July 27, 2006.

Nicole often meditated on St Josemaría's teachings, and incorporated them into her own life. One of the things he said was: **“Suffering is part of God's plans.**

This is the truth, however difficult it may be for us to understand it. This supernatural acceptance of suffering was, precisely, the greatest of all conquests. By dying on the cross Jesus overcame death. God brings life from death. The attitude of a child of God is not one of resignation to a possibly tragic fate; it is the sense of achievement of someone who has a foretaste of victory. In the name of this victorious love of Christ, we Christians should go out into the world to be sowers of peace and joy through everything we say and do.” (Christ is Passing By, 168)

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