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The pursuit of happiness

Mabel and Horace Ma tell *Reggie Rathour* that putting family over career comes at a cost but it's worth it

Photography by Brian Ching

Two years ago, when their accounting careers were getting better and better, Horace Ma and his wife, Mabel, did the unthinkable: they quit their jobs to become full-time parents.

The move shocked many, including Mabel's parents, who thought the pair's decision was "weird." But it wasn't an impulsive one. Horace, 38, says the idea started brewing while they were expecting their first child and they decided neither of them wanted to take the back seat in raising their children.

"Normally during one's life span, fingers crossed, maybe up to 80 years, there's not really that much time for someone to do everything they want. When Mabel conceived our first child, we had already lived half our lives. Therefore, we decided that if we were going to have kids, we had to be a full-time father and mother," Horace tells *A Plus*.

Swapping suits for aprons

Although it is more socially acceptable now than a decade ago for men to swap their pinstriped suits and office skills for aprons and household chores, Horace remains a rarity in Hong Kong with a full time job at hearth and home.

Horace, however, was at the avant-garde even when he first met Mabel at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, where they both studied accountancy. "I have always been unconventional and people say I am very creative. Unlike Mabel, who is very industrious, I am more a free-thinker," he says.

Mabel joined KPMG when she graduated from university in 1993 and qualified as a CPA with the Institute in 1997. She stayed at the firm for six years before moving to work at an online credit approval company for two years. In 2003, she became an internal auditor at a Hong Kong-listed cosmetics company.

Similarly, Horace, who also qualified in 1997, began his career at Arthur Andersen's Hong Kong office as a junior accountant and worked his way up to become a manager advising clients on accounting, auditing, listing rules compliance and risk management. He transferred in 2002 to PricewaterhouseCoopers, where he advised fellow accountants on how to apply accounting and auditing standards, and reviewed initial public offering prospectuses of companies prior to their listings in Hong Kong.

He left PwC in 2003 as a senior manager and became an assistant vice president in charge of finance in Asia with a private American company, Univescence Digital Studios, a distributor of online games in China with an annual turnover of more than 400 million yuan.

After six months of playing online games, Horace received a telephone



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call from a former Arthur Andersen colleague to help set up a Hong Kong office for a company called Protiviti. During the three years as director there, he led the company to the top of its segment, offering consulting services to companies dealing with the onerous compliance burdens of section 404 of the U.S.’s Sarbanes-Oxley Act. His clients were multinationals, as well as Hong Kong and mainland companies listed in the United States.

Experiencing their firsts

Five months after Bernice, their first daughter, was born on 1 September 2006, Mabel and Horace began their hiatus. The arrangement meant Bernice, now two years and five months old, and their second daughter, 11-month-old Eugenia, had both parents on hand every day.

Together, the couple witnessed many of the girls’ firsts: the first time they laughed, the first steps they took and the first time they uttered a word. Horace also admits that he has mastered the skill of changing diapers and the girls have taken to dad’s secret milk formula.

“I remember the day when Bernice

staggered across the room for the first time and grabbed hold of the tablecloth and pulled it down – everything went crashing to the floor,” says Horace. “After that, I said to Mabel, “The trouble now begins.”

Mabel and Horace believe they made the right move to stay home full time to tend to their young ones, but now their time is up: Horace recently headed back to work after a nearly two-year break.

Finances were uppermost in their minds when they first decided on their unusual move. The two reckoned they had just enough savings to keep them going for about 18 months.

“It was not easy. We really had to tighten our belts and did away with buying unnecessary things. We moved from our spacious flat to a smaller one to save on rent. It was tough but we were happy. Mabel’s parents also helped,” Horace says.

During this time, Horace did some freelance consulting work for his friends and served as an independent non-executive director for two listed companies, making what he described as “much-wanted funds.”

Despite the financial strain, Mabel and Horace say they’ve had time to



do things they couldn’t have done in their busy working lives. They learned basic Japanese (Japan is their favourite holiday destination), western cooking and Chinese calligraphy.

Horace co-authored a book about the top 12 accounting firms in Hong Kong. He became the chief executive officer of the Young Accountants Association, an organization that arranges seminars and talks on social issues. Apart from arranging events for members and non-members, he also contributes regular articles to the *Hong Kong Economic Journal* and appears as a guest host on *Metro Finance Radio 104*. He says being a media commentator allows him to meet other people and



learn about their professions.

The couple says parenthood taught them about life and spending more time together strengthened their bond.

“Parenthood is a lot more than choosing between natural birth and caesarian or breastfeeding and bottle feed. It is about how you can live the best of your life,” Mabel says. “For the past two years, Horace and I have had our ups and downs. We now understand more about ourselves and each other.”

Horace adds, “Many of my friends and former colleagues always say that family comes first and the job second. But how can that be the case when most of them only spend less than two hours

a day with their children? What sort of logic is that?”

Back to reality

Unfortunately, there seems to be no easy solution for striking a better work-life balance and with Horace returning to join the rat race recently, the couple had to switch roles to make the transition as smooth as possible for the family.

For instance, Mabel has taken over from Horace as the family’s driver, chauffeuring Bernice to pre-school in Kowloon Tong. While Mabel drives, Horace explains to Bernice in the back seat his new job as the controller of a U.K.-based online entertainment company, Samvo Strategic Holdings Ltd.

“She has accepted the fact that I am going back to work and that she won’t be seeing me daily,” he says. “She didn’t need much convincing. However, every night when she does the roll call at the dinner table and if I am not there, she will tell Mabel not to worry, saying that daddy has gone to meet uncles (friends).”

Horace says he feels extremely satisfied with his long career break. “It is a blessing to see your kids grow up to be healthy and that you have the time with them. We have learned what happiness is about. It is indeed very simple and being a billionaire is definitely not a pre-requisite for happiness,” he says. “If I had the funds, I would still be home with my family.” **A+**