

Site Administrators Tom & Evangeline Reed share how they met Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo, developed a friendship with them, and felt led to create and publish this site.

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If you've read our personal story from the "About Us" page, you know that after we took a Growing Kids God's Way class for the first time, we immediately started leading classes and continue to do so today. Leading classes is one of our greatest joys; not just for the pleasure of watching transformations occur in so many other families, but also for the benefits we reap in our own family as we are continually challenged to grow and learn and seek God's best for our own parenting efforts.

It was the summer after we led our first Growing Kid's God's Way (GKGW) class that we first met Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo at a regional parenting conference not far from our home town. Because of the profound changes we had already seen in our family after applying these parenting principles for just a few short months, Evangeline wept as she shook Gary's hand during a break at the conference. All the words that she could manage to get out were, "you changed my life." Gary's response was, "...and God will use you to help change the lives of others, as a result of what He's done for you." Ten years later we have a box full of letters from couples who have been in our GKGW classes over the years, testifying to the life-changing power of the Word of God applied to parenting. We know that our story is not an isolated one, as we have talked to many, many parents whose story is the same—their family was profoundly changed and their marriages transformed after taking a Growing Kids God's Way class.

Not long after that summer leadership conference, the Lord orchestrated for us a week at a family camp in Montana. This is one of our "memorials" stories, or stories of how God directly intervened in our lives to bring about events that humanly speaking could not have happened by chance. To make a long story short, we providentially had a cabin next to the Ezzos and enjoyed some quality time with them as they spent the week with two of their granddaughters and taught the chapel sessions. Our children played with their grandchildren, Tom went fly fishing with Gary, Evangeline got some personal time with Anne Marie and we got to know them in a more personal way for the first time. (And though our children don't remember it now—yes, we did lots of "pre-activity encouragement" before we sent them over to the Ezzos' cabin to play for the first time.☺)

During that week in Montana we began discussing the possibility of a parenting conference to be held in our area the next fall. We had some communication with Gary and Anne Marie through that year while planning for the conference, and then when they came to our town we enjoyed spending time with them once again. Some time later, they came to our area for another parenting conference on the other side of town, and stayed for several days encouraging the key leaders and visiting with a local pastor friend (who is an avid fisherman, like Gary).

On one of these trips we picked them up at the airport and after taking them to dinner we brought them back to our home where our regular Growing Kids God's Way class was in progress and being led by an assistant leader couple. We got home just as the video portion of the class was ending. We casually went in (without Gary and Anne Marie) to join the class who did not know we had just picked up the Ezzos. Gary, who loves a good laugh, discretely went around to the back door which looks into the family room where the class was being held. He just stood at the door peering in through the glass and lightly tapped at the door. One class member looked at him with a puzzled face and said, "Hey, doesn't he belong in our class?" When everyone got over the shock of who they were staring at, we all enjoyed a good laugh. We then had a great time with Gary and Anne Marie as they graciously held a Q&A session followed by a long fellowship time with our class. We remain in contact with many of the members of that class, and they still remind us of that event and the fun they had and how impressed they were at Gary and Anne Marie's genuine, sweet, and humble spirits.

On another occasion, we were working with a local Christian school which was looking into offering the Growing Families International curricula to their teachers and parents, and the principal wanted the teachers to have an in-service day to discuss how to apply biblical ethics to classroom management. The principal had been in one of our GKGW classes and wondered if Gary Ezzo would come and talk to his teachers. Gary kindly agreed to come—and he flew in from California for the day just to do a teacher in-service for this principal. He did not ask nor receive any remuneration from this, which we have since realized is characteristic of him—he takes joy in blessing people and asks nothing in return.

One year, we were going through a particularly difficult time with a medical issue in our family, and were completely discouraged and exhausted from the struggle this issue had caused our family over the last 18 months or so. Out of the blue, Gary called and asked if we would like to come and visit them in California for a week or so—bring the children and take a break, and he and Anne Marie would be willing to visit with us and see if they could encourage or help us in any way work through the emotional challenges we were facing as a result of this struggle.

We made the trip with our (then) three children in tow, and they blessed us with a week of gracious hospitality, sharing with us their favorite places around the city, visiting Disneyland, meeting their daughters and the rest of the grandchildren, meeting their friends, visiting with Auntie Anne and generally having a wonderful time. We enjoyed watching them in their grandparent role once again as some of their grandchildren came over to play with our children and go with us to Disneyland.

When some friends planned a baby shower for Evangeline for our 5<sup>th</sup> child, Tom thought it would be fun to have Anne Marie come, and he called to see if she would consider it. Though we live a good three hour plane flight from them, and though she and Gary already had a conference scheduled in another city that morning, Anne Marie was excited at the invitation and managed to secure a flight directly from the city where their conference was being held to make it to the baby shower that evening. Somehow, Tom

and everyone else managed to keep it a secret from Evangeline so that her presence would be a complete surprise. After the shower many of the moms and daughters stayed and had a precious time of questions and answers and just good fellowship with Anne Marie. A few weeks later, our youngest daughter was born on Anne Marie's birthday.

When all of the negative articles began coming out in the Christian publications, we were sad and discouraged and, even though we knew the Ezzos as friends, we began to wonder if we REALLY knew them...there was so much that we didn't know about the accusations that the critics were hurling at them. We knew the GFI materials well enough that we could see the biased reporting which painted the teaching in a bad light, and we *knew* that was untrue, but we had no way of knowing if any of the non-curriculum related accusations were true. It all sounded so well-researched and documented. We felt that we needed to have a heart to heart with them and ask them some pointed questions. Tom is a strong skeptic, and one of the weaknesses of his temperament is that he naturally assumes the worst, rather than the best. He put together some pointed questions and (what he considered at the time) reasonable assumptions and sent it to Gary in a letter. It must have been a hard letter for Gary to read, coming from friends, but Gary's response was gentle (though discouraged), and he suggested that we meet in person to discuss our concerns.

The next time they were in our area, they graciously sat down with us and discussed the issues at great length. They were very patient as we articulated our concerns, and at about 2:00 in the morning, the discussion ended with a sincere apology on our part for misjudging them and jumping to conclusions. We had fallen victim to some of the Internet gossip and tabloid journalism of some so called Christian publications and made judgments before knowing the facts. It was an eye opening and humbling experience. There is so much more behind the stories—some of which we have shared on this site and some which cannot be shared, though we wish it could. From our perspective, Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo are living in integrity of heart, and to the best of their ability they have done what they can to “live peaceably with all men.”

Since then, we have made every attempt to keep up with all of the GFI criticism and have become well versed on the subject. The Internet has become a very popular mass communication vehicle and the critics have used that forum very effectively to spread their unfounded accusations. After that meeting with the Ezzos, we began to think about putting together a comprehensive Internet response to the critics as well as a forum for sharing how God is using the GFI ministry. Finally, three years ago, we began slowly gathering resources and trying to make some sense out of the huge volume of information that would need to be shared. This effort has culminated in what you read on this EzzoTruth site.

Over the years, we have seen the Ezzos at least annually at the GFI National Conferences, which are held in a different city each year and on many occasions, have managed to spend some personal time with them during those trips. We visited them at their new home in South Carolina one year as part of a trip we were taking across the East Coast. During that two or three day visit the Ezzos treated us to a personal tour of

Charleston and our children remember Mr. Ezzo taking them to the candy store and out for ice cream and pizza. They had a ball. Tom and Gary spent hours till late in the night making shrimp bait balls out of clay and fishmeal in preparation for a lesson in shrimping the next day. Another time Tom called Gary asking about where to take our oldest daughter to go fishing, as Tom is not a fisherman and Gary is an expert on the subject. Gary insisted that the whole family come to visit and that he personally would handle the fishing lessons. We spent nearly a week enjoying their hospitality again, crabbing, fishing on the river, pulling the kids behind the boat on a water tube, visiting, playing games, eating crabs and shrimp and freshly caught fish until we couldn't eat any more.

We have observed this couple in a variety of situations, including some that would stress and challenge the strongest of us. While they are not perfect, and have never claimed to be, from what we have personally seen and heard, they have always handled themselves with grace, dignity, and integrity. In truth, we are baffled as to how the critics can claim some of the things they claim about them. Gary and Anne Marie are gracious, humble, kind, generous (we could tell some great stories here), full of fun, full of energy, they live an authentic faith, and their enthusiasm for the Lord and for His kingdom is contagious. Far from being unresponsive or proud when corrected, we have personally observed Gary to be quick to apologize and quick to correct errors when brought to him. Far from being untruthful or deceptive, we have found him to be honest and forthright.

They should not be put up on a pedestal nor should they be vilified when they do make mistakes. They have strengths and weaknesses just like everyone else. When they have erred they have done what they reasonably could—and often beyond what is reasonable—to make things right. Simply put, they are also two of the most loving and God-honoring people we have ever met. We like what one man of God said to describe people of position: there are no great Christians; there is only a great God working through weak people receptive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. By all markers of human behavior, we see Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo as following their life's calling in the service of the Lord to the best of their ability. We are honored to be among their friends.

*Tom and Evangeline Reed*