

## AMERICA'S CHEAPEST FAMILY?

You've probably heard the saying "Less is more." Most people would agree with this concept except when it comes to money. Over the years we've learned to make less seem like more, and in the process, we've been called "America's Cheapest Family," "The First Family of Frugal," "cheap-skates," "thrift-a-holics," "tightwads," or one of many other less flattering terms. We are living proof that even in tough economic times, kids can be raised, vacations enjoyed, a home purchased, cars paid for with cash and money put in the bank. All on a smaller than average income.

We are Annette and Steve Economides (pronounced *econo mee dis*). In 1982, when we were newly married, we had no idea of the fantastic journey that lay before us. By our first wedding anniversary, our family had grown to three. Steve earned a whopping \$7 an hour as a graphic designer. Annette stayed home to take care of the baby and stretch our money until it begged for mercy. In three years' time, with baby number two on the way, we purchased our first home (a repo-fix-upper). We put 15 percent down, and nine years later made the last payment on that house. Our average annual income at that time was less than \$35,000.

We'd been married 12 years in 1995, and were experiencing the tangible effects of spending less and accomplishing more. Our family had now grown to include five children, and our wonderful 1450-square-foot home seemed to have shrunk. We were literally "tripping over each other." After months of searching, we bought and moved into a much larger house, our "dream home." It was huge, comparatively, set on three-quarters of an acre with a citrus orchard, five bedrooms—one became an office/library—and lots of room for the kids to learn, grow and do chores. Whew! Lots of yard work! Applying

the same principles we used in our first home, we've continued to pay down our mortgage, built an emergency fund and bought a couple of new (used) cars.

**No Credit!** We've been told, "You'll always have a house payment and a car payment." Early on we made a commitment to live on what we earned and not on credit. This necessitated developing many money-saving strategies and economizing in ways that amazed even our thrifty parents. We focused on saving pennies and discovered that saving pennies eventually translated into saving dollars. Paying attention to the little things really added up. But even better, the more we paid attention to conserving our expenses, the more ways we discovered to save. It was a snowball effect. Of course,



*Stretching money has become a family tradition in the Economides household. The kids even get in on the act. The freedom of living within their means has been successfully transferred to the next generation!*

we shopped for clothes at thrift stores and consignment shops instead of "the mall," bought used furniture, used coupons for groceries, did our own haircuts (except for Annette's hair) and borrowed free movies from the local library. More significantly, we employed a very detailed spending plan (budget) that kept us from spending more than we earned and actually helped us save in advance for major purchases—furniture, car repairs, car purchases and kitchen remodels.

Neither of us has a financial or accounting background. Neither of our parents taught us to manage money—they were

frugal, but by no means "financial wizards." Before we married we read a book, *Your Finances in Changing Times* by Larry Burkett, which taught us the basics of setting up a household budget. It also revealed the pitfalls of credit and the dangers of its overuse. Our spending plan was in force from Day One of our marriage. We don't regret the "restrictions" it placed on us because, after a time, it actually allowed us more freedom, knowing that all our expenses were accounted for. Because we worked together on this budget system, we were able to keep our overhead from ballooning whenever our income increased.

**From Tears to Resolve.** Choosing to avoid credit had repercussions. For instance, in the early days of our marriage, we felt discouraged when the

Danish furniture truck pulled up to our apartment complex, and our next-door neighbors had beautiful new furniture delivered. Annette just sat on our \$25-orange-and-brown-plaid-missionary-purchased couches and cried. Or, after six years, when we were cramped in our smaller-almost-paid-off house, while many of our friends were buying their second or third much larger houses, we sat and wondered if there was something wrong with our plan. In both situations, after a time of soul-searching, we found solace and motivation in our decision to live within our means without the use of credit.

**Seven mouths to feed.** Feeding a family of seven doesn't require a second mortgage. Allocating just \$350 per month for food and disposable items—including paper goods, cleaning supplies and personal care items—our family eats very well. The menu isn't boring either, regularly including steak, leg of lamb, turkey and some great Italian and Greek dishes—family recipes handed down for generations. Our kids eat better, healthier meals than most of their peers — and

most of their friends agree.

**Helping others.** Over the years we have helped scores of individuals and families straighten out some pretty sticky financial situations. Dealing with creditors, past-due bills and bloated budgets, we've helped these families cut a path through the money jungle to the pastures of financial stability. Writing this newsletter is a result of years of "Economiser" living and helping others achieve financial freedom.

Previously, The Tightwad Gazette, published by Amy Dacyczyn, provided a wonderful avenue for this type of idea exchange. Unfortunately, for those of us who loved her publication, Amy ceased publishing in 1996. Several friends asked if we were going to take up the torch. The time wasn't right for us then. But in 2003 our kids were a little older and after Steve had three jobs evaporate in a two year period, we knew it was time. When we started writing this newsletter, we didn't realize that so many doors would open for our message. From interviews by local newspaper and TV reporters to appearances on Good Morning America and international TV and radio. The message of living within your means is resonating world-wide.

We were first called "America's Cheapest Family" when we appeared on Good Morning America in 2004. Initially we flinched at the word cheap. Ugh! We thought of ourselves as deal-makers and bargain hunters not "cheapskates." But, in a language that has no positive adjectives to describe someone who lives within their means, and always has money in the bank, we can understand the dilemma. After a long evaluation and numerous discussions, we decided that if being America's Cheapest Family provided us with a platform to help many thousands of families break away from financial enslavement, then we would be willing to accept it as a mantle of honor. Besides, it's much easier for most people to pronounce than Economides.

No matter where you are on your frugal journey, there are always new ways to save. So please join us as we sound the trumpet to call all true and faithful Economisers—and those who want to learn—to prove to the world that there is honor and wonderful joy in living better while spending less.

*Economizing Together!*

Annette and Steve Economides

# CHOPPING SHOPPING

"I'm running to the store to pick up a couple things for dinner— be back in 20 minutes." This is the mantra of the harried shopper, home from work or rushed at the end of a day of non-stop errands or transporting kids to various activities. For some families a trip to the grocery store has become a "daily necessity." We shop once a month and spend an average of \$350, which includes all food items, paper goods and cleaning supplies. Limiting our food shopping not only saves time but loads of money, too. It wasn't always this way—here's how we started.

When we were first married and living in an apartment—with a very small refrigerator/freezer—Annette went food shopping once each week. A year later, she met a neighbor who had a free-standing freezer in her apartment. This neighbor offered to share a shelf in her freezer, so, we took her up on the offer. We stretched our shopping to two-week intervals. It took about the same amount of time to shop for two weeks' groceries as it did for one. With this one change, we cut our shopping time in half.

In 1984, we purchased a small 9-cubic-foot used chest freezer. We decided to try to stretch our food shopping to once a month to feed our family of three. We've been doing it together ever since—twelve times a year we go on a "hunt" for a month's worth of food. The whole process from leaving the house to putting the groceries away takes about five hours. Over the years, the process has evolved. Here's how we do it now.

**Shopping Together?** With a large family, shopping for a whole month is a sizeable task and shouldn't be attempted single-handedly. If you have a smaller family, planning and shopping will take much less time. Single parents can shop with an older child or get someone else to help.

When Steve first started shopping with Annette the extent of his involvement was limited to picking up specific sale items. As time went on, he learned to match coupons with sale items and even graduated to his own coupon envelope—shazam! Now we divide the store into two sections: the inner aisles—Annette's domain—and the outer loop (produce, meat, dairy and deli)—Steve's area.

We know that many men would never think of helping their wives grocery shop. As a matter of fact, many would elect to have a root canal just to avoid this possibility. We understand this aversion, but honestly, there are times when neither of us feels like starting this 5-hour marathon, but we figure it only happens once a month and

we can get through it . . . together!

Steve's advice to men is "If you want to eat it, you ought to help in hunting it down. Besides, it's a great way to love and support your wife."

Okay, we know many of you wives are saying, "I was hearing you when you reduced your trips to the store to two times each month, but getting my husband to go with me and doing it once a month is just plain crazy." Before you give up on this idea, please remember that we've been doing this since 1985. Don't expect to do what we do. Simply use this article as a catalyst to question if what you are doing is really efficient. Can you make some changes and implement a couple of these ideas? Sure you can! Can you discuss this with your husband? You bet, and you might be pleasantly surprised by his response when you enlist his help to save money on the food budget, just make sure you have a plan before you take him with you. Remember the big picture: Let's find ways to make our money go further and reduce the stress in our lives. Minimizing the number of shopping trips can accomplish both.

Working together and utilizing the aisle



and loop system, we can visit two stores in one night—one store for sale items and the other for the balance of the month's-worth of shopping. Here are the basics of our plan.

**The Ads.** The week we go shopping, we purchase—or borrow—Wednesday's newspaper; that's the day grocery ads are published in our area. We plan our menu/shopping list based on what is on sale. The first time Annette did a month-long menu plan, it took almost a whole day to map out just the dinners. Now she can crank it out in about 30 minutes. She has developed a huge repertoire of meals in her menu book, enough to go about three months without repeating a meal. But ask the kids and they'll tell you that they have a few favorites that Mom cooks each month.

**Coupons.** We each review our coupons, weeding out expired ones and seeing which can be combined with sale items to make a real killing – In our area most grocers offer to double manufacturers' coupons up to 50 cents off. With a little planning, we can often get needed – and sometimes frivolous – items for pennies or free! Reviewing the coupons this way also provides us with a reminder of which coupons we have available for those unexpected sales that we may stumble across.

**Get a Sitter.** When the kids were younger, we would pick up and pay a baby sitter while we went to the store. It is well worth the money to be able to concentrate and calculate what the best values are. We love our children dearly, but trying to make them behave for four hours of intense grocery shopping is an unrealistic expectation. As they've grown up, they occasionally accompany us to the store and are a great help with the hunt. Usually our older daughter, Becky, watches the younger ones, and yes, we do pay her.

**Hi-tech Fun.** Often Steve has questions about specials he has come across—managers' close-outs—and whether to buy them or not. He used to walk the outer loop looking up and down each aisle to find Annette, so he decided to bring a pair of FRS radios—walkie-talkies—and now rings her with questions or phenomenal deals he has discovered. We feel like spies—"Hey, Annette, you

won't believe what I just found. . . ."

**Put It Away.** Once we get home, we put away only the perishable items. We're usually too exhausted to do everything, and the kids love to forage through the bags looking for "surprises." The next morning, the kids help put away the dry goods. We label cereal boxes with the month and year so we don't end up with 2-year-old cereal sitting on our shelves.

**Fruit for a Month.** Limiting our trips to the store means that certain fruits must be eaten earlier in the month because they are more perishable. Bananas and grapes usually last a week. Once they're gone, we move on to other fruits. Pears can last two weeks. Apples and oranges, carefully stored, can last a month.

**Got Milk?** We are often asked about storing milk, cheese and bread; we carefully freeze all three. Milk: Pour off a little to allow for expansion. Cheese: We mainly buy shredded cheese, but be aware that if you do freeze chunks of cheese, you will have difficulty slicing it—freezing will cause it to crumble. Bread: It needs to be carefully set in the freezer to avoid crushing and creating grotesquely misshapen loaves.

We use many other techniques to stretch our grocery dollars and will discuss them in upcoming issues. Topics such as chasing loss-leaders, storing lettuce and other veggies, maximizing savings with coupons, the Wal-Mart Price Match, utilizing warehouse stores to your advantage, bread outlets and grocery seconds stores.

We know that we've shared some pretty radical strategies for food shopping and storage. Even if you can reduce your trips to the store to two or three per month, you will see a significant decline in your food budget. If you don't have a freezer yet, you can still limit your shopping trips by planning a weekly menu and shopping only once a week. Remember, the less you shop the more you save.

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## QUICK TRIPS?

How long does a "quick trip" to the store really take? Just a few minutes? Let's calculate and see where our time goes



**Drive Time:** 10 minutes. Let's assume you only have to drive about 10 minutes to get to the store, or you hit it on the way home from work.

**Shopping Time:** 30 minutes. Of course you only need a few items for the next couple of days, but you wander through the produce section and the bakery and the deli. You keep moving, picking up the items on your list and "just a few" impulse items. But what happens if you meet one of your neighbors or a friend in the store? Whew! Kiss another 20 minutes good-bye.

**Check-Out Time:** 10 minutes. Could be longer if you shop at dinner time.

**Load and Unload:** 10 minutes

**Put Groceries Away:** 10 minutes.

There you have it. A "quick trip" to the store can easily eat up an hour and 10 minutes (or more).

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## MOM IS COOKING

I really love your newsletter. It's just what I've been needing all these years. It really helped me in more ways than one. I'm a single mom and for years it's always been easier for me to go to a fast food place or restaurant for breakfast, lunch and dinner. And of course, I never had money for other things we needed. But thank God you opened up my eyes! I have since started looking through the ads on Wednesdays and I've gone to the grocery store (something I haven't done for years). My fridge, freezer and pantry are overstuffed and boy is my family happy. Mom is cooking again!!!

Not only that, I've saved money and been able to take care of our other needs that I didn't have money for before. Thanks for your help!

*Jean from Dallas, Texas*

## the back fence

Neighbors share their great ideas!

### QUICK PAINT TRAY CLEAN-UP

When painting, put a supermarket plastic bag over the paint tray, then pour in the paint. When you're finished painting you can pour any unused paint back into the can then pull off the plastic bag so that it turns inside out. I've used this method for years and it really shortens cleanup time considerably.

**Tony Meola - Mauldin, SC**

### HOT DOGS, BASEBALL, APPLE PIE AND FRUGALITY

We love to go the see the Oakland A's play, but don't like to pay the high ball-park prices. So, we freeze plastic bottles full of water and take them with us. We buy discounted tickets for \$7.50 each, ride public transportation (BART) with a senior discount for \$4 (instead of \$16)

and pack our own lunch. We are amazed at the junk food consumed there as we watch kids with their trays of nachos or the adults who are willing to shell out \$7.50 for a beer. We have a great time and for less.

**Patricia McBain - Soquel, CA**

### PET BOXERS

Pet toys are expensive so we use cardboard boxes! Our lab loves cardboard, the thicker the better because it "crunches." Of course it looks like a box exploded in our house. We also use old mis-matched socks tied into knots for them to play with.

**Pamela T. - Yuma, AZ**

### SUITCASES SMELL FRESH

When I empty my suitcase after returning from a trip, I put two or three fabric softener sheets into it. It always smells fresh the next time I need to use it.

**Ann Marie Pella - Penn Hills, PA**

### STOCKING UP ON SCHOLASTICS

When my son comes home from school with a Scholastic Book order, there are always one or two \$.95 books listed on the front. I stock up on these for birthday gifts, or even baby shower gifts. Sometimes they will even come with a matching pencil or other item that make a great gift. And for only 95 cents. No more running out at the last minute and paying more for a gift when my children are invited to a birthday party. And I love giving books as a gift anyway, instead of toys.

**Dana Prescott - Rochester, MN**

### SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

Keep up the great work, your newsletter provides lots of variety and contains something for all of us (and I'm over 75 years-old!). I've saved over \$250 this year by cancelling my seldom viewed satellite TV service!

**Zee - Grand Prairie, Texas**

Dear Friends,

We have been living the "Economiser Lifestyle" since 1982. During that time we've found thousands of ways to save money on everything from food to fun and cars to castles (well, really more like houses). Many friends have encouraged us to put in writing the strategies and systems we've used to raise a family of five kids and still manage to save enough money to pay cash for cars and pay off our house. The **HomeEconomiser** is a window into the life of our family and those we have helped to get out of debt. Each issue we'll share some of our brilliant successes and unfortunately, some of the miserable failures we have experienced in our attempt to live a simple and frugal lifestyle. Our hope is that we will provide encouragement to maximize your time and money so that you can reach the goals that really matter.

Annette & Steve Economides

*Annette & Steve*

*America's Cheapest Family*

## AMERICA'S CHEAPEST FAMILY® GETS YOU RIGHT ON THE MONEY

**YOUR GUIDE TO LIVING BETTER, SPENDING LESS AND CASHING IN ON YOUR DREAMS!**

**By Steve & Annette Economides**

This is a book we wish existed when we were first married. It's a common-sense guide to saving money on everything and setting up a family budget that really works. The information included in this book will help you make your money go further than you ever imagined. It's not just theories and calculations, but full of practical tips and real life stories.

Available in book stores, January 2007 or on [AmericasCheapestFamily.com](http://AmericasCheapestFamily.com)

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