

Fair Oaks

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FROM MOUNT RAINIER
TO THE AMERICAN RIVER:

*The Cassel Family's
Adventurous Life*

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FROM MOUNT RAINIER TO THE AMERICAN RIVER:

The Cassel Family's Adventurous Life

By Laura I. Winn

Photography by Isabel Ollinger and courtesy of the Cassel family

ONE WEEK AFTER Rory and Natalie Cassel vowed to love and cherish each other for all eternity, Rory shipped out from California to Virginia for a year of Army training in the spring of 2013. Even though the newlyweds would be lucky to see each other for a few hours on the sporadic weekend, Natalie followed. Rory's eight years of service as a special operations logistician and paratrooper kept the couple moving from coast to coast and then across the Atlantic. They chased adventure at every station, hiking Mount Rainier in Washington and taking a cable car to Zugspitze, the highest peak in Germany. Along the way, they welcomed sons Archie,

10, and Arthur, 6. When the time came to choose a permanent landing spot for civilian life, Rory and Natalie returned to the town where they first met as teens.

"I grew up in Fair Oaks, so moving back here always felt like coming home," Natalie said. "After years of moving around with the military, there's something really grounding about being back in the place that raised me and now getting to raise our kids here, too!"

Natalie described finding their home in early 2022 as "a literal dream" — one she didn't think possible. For more than a year, the Cassels were outbid on smaller homes

in Citrus Heights, Carmichael and Orangevale. They were fully priced out of Fair Oaks. Then, a friend connected them with a woman selling her home without a realtor — a home within half a mile of Natalie's parents and two of her four brothers.

"When we met Kate, we instantly connected," Natalie explained. "I shared how much I wanted to be back in Fair Oaks, close to my parents and siblings."

Kate had chosen her house for the same reasons. She hugged Natalie and sold the Cassels her home. With its tall ceilings and white walls waiting for the Cassel family to spill their creativity into and its safe location

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Fort Jackson in South Carolina



Pinnacles National Park in California

in a quiet neighborhood, everything about the property was just right. “It was magical in the way the stars aligned,” Natalie said. “Every time I pull into the driveway, I’m so grateful I have my home.”

Natalie has since filled the walls with splashes of color to fit her style. She painted Rory’s office with a cheerful pink-and-white checkerboard pattern. The boys’ bathroom is bright orange with hand-painted daisies. When inspiration strikes, Natalie

paints, even if it’s late at night while her children sleep.

Natalie puts those artistic talents to work at her son’s school and her alma mater, Earl LeGette Elementary. For the book fair, she transformed the library into a whimsical Wonderland. For Archie’s school plays, she created the luscious green sets for *The Jungle Book*, and the icy blue backdrops for *Frozen*. Displaying his range as a young

actor, Archie portrayed the bad tiger, Shere Khan, and the good guy, Kristoff. A pro with a needle, Rory sewed costumes for both productions. “When Archie has been a part of school plays, it becomes a full family effort,” Natalie explained.

Working at the boys’ school renewed Natalie’s childhood desire to teach. After five years of solemn work in funeral homes, the stark contrast of the spirited school environment sparked a return to the classroom. She is currently studying at American River College.

Rory has followed a similar trajectory. After military service, he became a cemetery grave digger and advanced to grounds operations manager. His experiences led him to pursue a degree in landscape architecture at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco, with the long-term goal of designing and improving veterans’ and national cemeteries.

When their time isn’t occupied by school and studies, the Cassel family prefers to be outdoors, especially along the American River. “There’s something so special about being able to hop on our bikes, head down to the river, and jump into the water,” Natalie said. “It feels like having a natural backyard.”

Exploring the riverbanks, they go “herping,” searching for reptiles in their natural habitats. Archie catches lizards, while little Arthur loves looking for snakes with his Uncle Scott. Every Fourth of July, the Cassels join extended family and hundreds of other locals for a float down the river. “It’s one of those simple, perfect summer traditions



Archie and Arthur



Rory and Natalie

we'll never outgrow," Natalie said.

The family has also started a more eccentric summer tradition: watching TV from only one distinct era. Rory and Natalie introduced the boys to their childhood favorites from the '80s and '90s. Last summer, they went even further back, exclusively viewing black-and-white programming. To their surprise, the boys had heartfelt connections to "Leave It to Beaver" and "I Love Lucy."

"We're raising kids like it's the '90s," Natalie said. "We're big believers in letting kids be kids. Our garage has become a neighborhood hangout spot for kids. It's always full of bikes, laughter and friends coming and going. If you see a pack of kids on bikes, that's probably ours."

Virtually the only time the colorful Cassel house isn't bustling with activity is when the family heads out for adventure. Rory and Archie compete together in paintball. Arthur has taken up rock climbing. Since moving back to California, the foursome has made an annual camping trip to Monterey. There, they swim and fish in the ocean and explore tidepools for hermit crabs and sea slugs. Budding angler Arthur hopes to reel in a shark one day. "I want my kids to be independent and have a childhood they can look back on with good memories," Natalie said.

Last summer, the couple took their children on an especially impactful journey to South Carolina. They watched with pride and reflection as their nephew, Wyatt, graduated from Army basic training on the same field, in the same company and on the same date that Rory had all those years before. For Natalie, it was a full-circle moment. "Revisiting a chapter of our lives when we were so young, but now experiencing it as a family, was something unforgettable," she said. ■



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