

DEDICATED DADDY

VOICES talks to MP Hri Kumar Nair about what matters most to him and late-night pursuits.

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WHEN SARAH ELIZABETH NAIR was born two years ago, her lawyer and politician father's life changed dramatically.

From exotic travels with his wife to countries like South Africa for a safari, the family now goes to places nearby which are more accommodating to travellers with a toddler in tow and which have distractions that would appeal to her.

From playing the occasional game of tennis and jogging, his exercise regimen has changed to playing ball with his little girl. From routinely clocking out of law firm Drew and Napier at 9 or 10pm, Mr Nair, who is a partner there, now makes it a point to try to return home by 7pm, and continues working after his daughter goes to bed.

Free time? He tells you: "Whatever free time I have I spend with the baby and the wife!"

Not that there is much when you're an MP (for Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC) with a schedule packed with meet-the-people sessions and grassroots events, and drafting Parliamentary speeches. His latest speech suggests appointing ministers from outside the pool of MPs.

The situation is compounded as he also has to attend board meetings for several organisations, among them the Media Development Authority and NTUC Choice Homes.

Despite all this, the Senior Counsel manages to carve out some time to watch Barney videos with his daughter. He explains: "She is a Barney person. She has to watch at least 10 minutes of Barney videos before she sleeps."

Asked about his favourite activity with Sarah, the 43-year-old says: "The activity is not relevant. She jumps from one to another. What matters more for me is just being with her, and doing stuff." He has just purchased a bicycle with a child seat to try out with Sarah, who turns two in July.

"Fatherhood brings a joy which is deep, and a responsibility which is sobering. I cannot remember my life before I became a father, nor do I want to," he says.

Sarah's upbringing is somewhat different from that of her father, who was the youngest of nine children. Mr Nair's father, who was close to 50 when he was born, was a hospital attendant who could not play much with his children, apart from the occasional game of carom.

While the family was poor, one of the most enriching things he reckons his father did for him was to get him

to take up Chinese as a second language. Sarah, too, will study Mandarin.

"All my siblings were either studying Tamil or Malay; my father decided to do something different for me," says Mr Nair. "Learning the language did help remove some barriers."

He recalls that after he graduated with a law degree from the National University of Singapore, he and two Chinese friends went backpacking across Malaysia and Thailand.

It was only his third time out of Singapore, not counting short trips to Malaysia. The first was to Taiwan with the National Junior College school band, for which he played percussion. The second to Melbourne, with fellow law undergraduates for a moot competition.

One incident in particular stands out. He recalls when he and his friends were walking on a street in Thailand, a Thai vendor pointed to them and said: "Light skin and dark skin walk together, must be Singaporean."

He adds: "That is the Singapore brand, how others see us. Singapore is not colour-blind, but we are in a far better position than most others."

His wife is Chinese. They met when she was working at his law firm, but only started dating when she joined another company. He says: "I have friends who tell me point blank they'd never marry someone of another race and would not allow their children to either. I'm not saying they're wrong. There are some forces you cannot rationalise. People generally take comfort in those who are more like them."

In his case, he and his wife clicked. "There were no objections from my family. If there were any barriers, they were broken down very quickly."

With Sarah now in the picture, theirs is what Mr Nair calls a typical "modern Singaporean family": Everyone speaks English, eats every kind of cuisine and celebrates all kinds of festivals, including Chinese New Year, Deepavali and Christmas — Mr Nair is Catholic.

And like many men here, he indulges in an equally typical late-night pursuit on Saturdays — watching the English Premier League. His favourite football team is Manchester United.

"The baby is asleep, my wife is about to fall asleep, I'm done with all my activities and it's my time to watch TV unmolested. This is my late-night pleasure," he confesses.

