

Low wages, HIGH HOPES

With two low-paid jobs and a chicken in the yard to provide for four kids and a grandmother, Losena and Kilifi Mafile'o just manage to make ends meet. Frances Morton talks to a Mangere family working hard for a better future.

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HER LAST STORY WAS ABOUT RICARDO SIMICH.
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SIMON YOUNG.





EVERY SATURDAY MORNING THE MAFILE'O FAMILY ATTEND THE TONGAN SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH IN MT WELLINGTON. (FROM LEFT) CECELIA, MOSA'ATI, KILIFI, LOSENA, A FAMILY FRIEND AND GRANDMOTHER CECELIA. FRONT: CLIFFORD AND AMALANI.



At 6am on one of the coldest days of the year, the dew hasn't yet hardened into ice crystals on car wind-screens in the pre-dawn freeze. The sun won't be up for another hour and a half, but the Mafile'o family are already going about their daily routine.

Their cosy three-bedroom house at the end of a cul-de-sac in Mangere East, home to the family of seven, is full of activity. Every weekday morning Losena and Kilifi Mafile'o get up at 5am to prepare for work and make school lunches. There's a 5.30am wake-up call for their four children — Mosa'ati, Cecelia, Clifford and Amalani — triggering a flurry of school uniforms, school bags, gobbled toast and cornflakes.

"Once they hear me get up and I come in and turn on the lights they're up and ready to go," says Losena. "They've got no moaning because they understand why I'm coming in and why it's so early. We've got a dream for their future. Even though we've got a hard time here in life, our family is always together."

By 6.15am, the whole family, including the children's grandmother Cecelia (Losena's mother), pack into the car and Kilifi reverses out of the driveway, joining in the march of car headlights along State Highway 20 between Manukau and Hillsborough.

Despite the early hour, the road is busy with vans and people-movers carrying shift workers to factories and warehouses throughout the city. In two hours' time, Auckland's arterial routes will be clogged with drivers destined for desks in heated glass-tower offices, but before sunrise the low-skilled, low-paid workforce is on the move.

They are an often-overlooked group of society, who turn up in the media only when hand-wringing politicians bemoan an emerging underclass, or a power bill goes tragically unpaid or the unlawful antics of kids roaming the streets are blamed on absent working parents.

The rising cost of food and petrol are tightening budgets everywhere, but when you are living week to week a 10c-a-litre rise at the pump has a huge impact.



The Mafile'os are one low-wage Auckland family focused on making the most of their situation now and for their future. With both parents working fulltime, they scrape together a combined gross income of \$63,000, below the average household income of \$68,000. Their average individual weekly income equates to about \$600 each, \$270 less per week than the average income of people in their age bracket (40-44-year-olds). Nearly 60 per cent of their income goes on the bare essentials — housing, food and transport to school and work.

TOP LEFT: BREAKFAST TIME FOR (FROM LEFT) CLIFFORD, LOSENA AND MOSA'ATI. ABOVE: LOSENA AND KILIFI BUCKLE AMALANI (REAR) AND CLIFFORD IN FOR THE EARLY MORNING DRIVE TO SCHOOL AND WORK.



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WEEKLY BUDGET

Income (after tax)	
Losena	\$515
Kilifi	\$461
Working for Families rebate	\$212
Total	\$1188

EXPENSES	
Mortgage	\$452.50
Food	\$200
Petrol	\$150
Power	\$30
Phone	\$20
Cellphones	\$20
Insurance	\$15
Church donation	\$30
Other	\$110.50

SAVINGS	
Losena	\$30
Kilifi	\$130

With one vehicle and six varying destinations, the Mafile'o family's mornings follow a highly regimented system. First stop on the daily drop-off run is always Losena's workplace, the Mt Roskill food distribution company Foodstuffs, in time for her to clock in at 7am.

On Mondays and Fridays, the children and Grandma Cecelia are then delivered to Losena's sister's house in New Windsor, where they will stay until it's time for the children to be taken to school by their Aunt Sally.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, the two older children go to breakfast club at 11-year-old Cecelia's school, Wesley Intermediate in Mt Roskill. The eldest, Mosa'ati, 13, a Year Nine student, catches a bus from there to Mt Albert Grammar, except on Wednesdays when he gets dropped off for an early practice of the school choir, Harmonize.

Clifford, six, attends Wesley Primary, near the intermediate. Amalani is only four, so too young to go to school. He spends the day in the care of his grandmother with his aunt and one-year-old cousin. Losena says ferrying preschoolers to and from kindergarten in the middle of the day was just too difficult logistically, so all her children have received their early childhood education at home from special learning books she bought for Mosa'ati and has photocopied and reused.

The final stop on the morning delivery round is Kilifi's workplace, Vita, a sprawling foam and polyester-fibre



TOP: KILIFI OPERATES THE QUILTING MACHINE AT VITA FOAM FACTORY IN AVONDALE, HIS WORKPLACE FOR THE PAST 13 YEARS. ABOVE: LOSENA HAS BEEN WORKING AT FOODSTUFFS DISTRIBUTION WAREHOUSE IN MT ROSKILL FOR 17 YEARS. SHE SPENDS ALL DAY ON HER FEET COLLATING ORDERS FOR SUPERMARKETS FROM KAITAIA TO THAMES.



factory in Avondale's industrial zone. Kilifi, 40, has worked at Vita for 13 years. He started off in the quality-control department and for the past 11 years has operated the quilting machine, making duvets, sleeping bags and mattress covers. He earns \$14.32 an hour.

The morning *Metro* visits, the vast, unheated shed where Kilifi works is biting cold and workers are rugged up in jackets and woollen beanies. Kilifi has set the quilting machine to king-size mattresses and is scooping up blue-patterned foam-stuffed lengths of fabric as they slide onto the floor, piling them into towers ready for the six sewing machinists at the next station.

It's repetitive work. Dozens of mechanical needles clatter out syncopated rhythms punctuated by the pow of air staple-guns from across the aisle where workers

are assembling couches for Farmers, Furniture City and The Warehouse. Elsewhere, people are stuffing pillows and stacking monster rolls of carpet underlay.

The factory operates 24 hours a day, employing 250 workers on three shifts making thousands of foam products from beanbags to Sleepyhead beds. If a big order comes in and the bosses want Kilifi to start at 5am, he'll be there. There's an extra \$1 an hour in it for him.

Kilifi knocks off at 4.15pm and begins the reverse trip home. Losena finishes work at the enormous Foodstuffs warehouse at 3.30pm and will already be at her sister's place waiting to rendezvous with Kilifi and the children for the drive home. Losena has worked as a storeperson at Foodstuffs for 17 years, putting together orders for Pak'nSave, Four Square and New World shops from Northland to Thames. She is on her feet all day, pushing a trolley along the giant aisles, picking out products that supermarkets have ordered and bundling them up for delivery.

Forklifts buzz up and down, hoisting goods from the high shelves to those within reach known as the pickface, beeping warnings as they zoom across pedestrian thoroughfares. There is some jovial gossip when workers coincide; many of them have also worked here for several years.

At work, Losena is known as Rose because when she started, people were unfamiliar with her Tongan name. "I enjoy myself," says Losena. "I've been working there a long time and I know the people there. I know what the place is like."

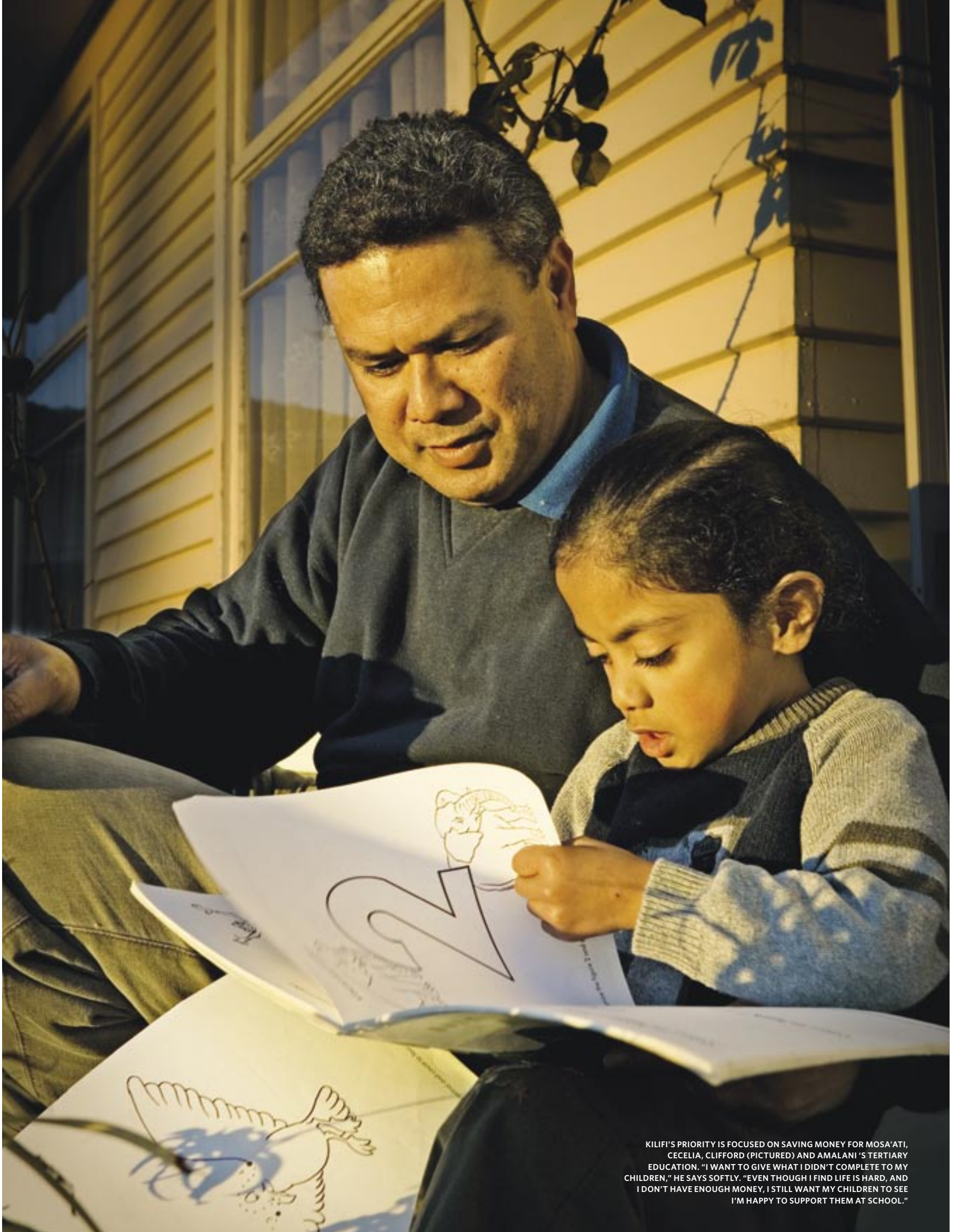
Workmates jokingly crowned Losena the "champion of pregnancy" when her first two children were born, because she worked right up to the births, then returned to work after only three months' leave. Losena wanted to keep earning as much as she could and was concerned she would lose her job. However, the premature birth of her third child, Clifford, at just 31 weeks forced her to take time off.

She conscientiously returned to work after a year but suffered ill health and exhaustion during her fourth pregnancy, so adhered to her doctor's advice and resigned from Foodstuffs in 2003 before the birth of her youngest son Amalani. But she couldn't stay away. Two years later, Losena was back at work, motivated by the idea of providing for the family's future.

Recently Losena's income got a boost. In April, distribution workers held strikes that resulted in Foodstuffs increasing Losena's hourly rate from \$14.59 to \$16 (\$15.75 plus an attendance bonus of 25 cents for showing up). The company also provides a superannuation plan and health insurance, which covers doctors' visits and prescriptions for Losena and her family.

Both Losena and Kilifi seem resigned to their low-skilled, lowly paid employment and grateful for steady work, but they are determined that their children's skill level and earning power will be greater. "In New Zealand, life without education is hopeless," says Kilifi.

Kilifi emigrated from Tonga as a teenager in 1986. His



KILIFI'S PRIORITY IS FOCUSED ON SAVING MONEY FOR MOSA'ATI, CECELIA, CLIFFORD (PICTURED) AND AMALANI'S TERTIARY EDUCATION. "I WANT TO GIVE WHAT I DIDN'T COMPLETE TO MY CHILDREN," HE SAYS SOFTLY. "EVEN THOUGH I FIND LIFE IS HARD, AND I DON'T HAVE ENOUGH MONEY, I STILL WANT MY CHILDREN TO SEE I'M HAPPY TO SUPPORT THEM AT SCHOOL."



KILIFI AND LOSENA KEEP TO A STRICT BUDGET THAT PREVENTS SPENDING MONEY ON NIGHTS OUT TOGETHER ALONE. AFTER A LONG DAY AT WORK THEY LIKE RELAXING IN THEIR MANGERE EAST HOME. "MY TIME WITH MY HUSBAND IS REALLY IMPORTANT FOR ME," SAYS LOSENA, "BECAUSE EVERY DAY, WE NEVER SEE EACH OTHER."

father had come to New Zealand beforehand looking for a route out of poverty in the Islands and found work in a factory making bathroom sinks. As soon as he obtained permanent residency he brought over his wife and nine children. In October the following year, Kilifi's father died of a stroke, leaving his mother to bring up Kilifi and his eight brothers and sisters on a widow's benefit.

Kilifi, who was preparing to sit School Certificate, had to take on a part-time job frying chips at a takeaway bar and juggled study with working until 11pm. He made it through high school and enrolled in an accounting course at Unitec, but was forced to drop out in his second year

when he couldn't afford the fees.

Today his priority is the next generation, and he is putting money away for Mosa'ati, Cecelia, Clifford and Amalani's tertiary education. "I want to give what I didn't complete to my children," says Kilifi softly. "Even though I find life is hard, and I don't have enough money, I still want my children to see I'm happy to support them at school."

Losena finished her schooling in Tonga and came to New Zealand with her younger sister in 1988 after her father, a carpenter who suffered from diabetes, had his leg amputated and could no longer work.

"In Tonga, we always relied on my father," says Losena. "He was the one who was working hard. After he got sick and there was no one looking after my family, I had to come to New Zealand with my sister. We started looking for a job to support my Mum and Dad."

Losena found work at an ice-cream shop in the city for a short time before getting her current job at Foodstuffs, and would send money to Tonga for her mother and younger siblings. She met Kilifi, who orchestrated an introduction after seeing her walking to work, and they married in 1994.

Losena's father died around this time and her mother moved over from Tonga when Losena was pregnant with Mosa'ati. Having Grandma Cecelia living with them has meant there is an extra child-carer in the household and allowed Losena to return to work full-time. Although Cecelia receives a widow's benefit, Kilifi and Losena insist she keeps it for her own use, and they refuse to use it for family expenses.

When Mosa'ati was born in 1995 the Mafile'os moved into a two-bedroom state house in Mt Roskill where they stayed, while the family grew, until 2006. They paid rent of \$225 a week. When it rained, water would flood under the house, rendering it damp and harmful for premature Clifford's fragile health. Losena and Kilifi were set on getting their own home they had dreamed of since their wedding day.

The opportunity came when Losena resigned from her job before Amalani was born and was able to cash in her superannuation. This gave the Mafile'os a deposit of \$20,000. They spent three years searching for a house to buy in Mt Roskill but couldn't find anything suitable they could afford and were forced to look further afield. In 2006, they eventually settled on a tidy three-bedroom wooden bungalow in Mangere East for \$255,000. "It's not our heart in this area but we couldn't wait to buy a house for our kids because we know the price is keeping on going up and if we didn't do something we're going to be stuck somewhere," says Losena.

Despite moving out of the suburb, the Mafile'os identify strongly with Mt Roskill. The children still attend school there because their parents didn't want to cause any distress by shifting them. As well, Wesley Primary and Intermediate are much more accessible from Vita and Foodstuffs than schools in Mangere East.

The family home has a flat backyard, a generous kitchen, a vege garden currently producing a good crop of silverbeet and potential to build on extra rooms to accommodate growing teenagers. Sleeping quarters are tight, with Mosa'ati and his grandmother sharing a bedroom, Cecelia, Clifford and Amalani in the master bedroom and Losena and Kilifi in the third.

The family spend most of their time in the communal living areas. The formal lounge is decorated with posed family portraits, *Bible* verses, a silver cup Mosa'ati picked up for music at Wesley Intermediate, and two more cups awarded to Mosa'ati and Cecelia each, for citizenship at the same school.

The adjacent dining room has been converted into a kids' lounge. Class photos from Wesley Primary paper the walls and a collection of class-made artefacts — a



papier-mâché cup, a hand-painted cushion — are on display. Squishy couches are covered with soft rugs and there are doilies on the jugs in the china cabinet. The house is summed up in one word — snug.

At the time the Mafile'os were moving into their new home, Losena's sister and brother had recently emigrated from Tonga. To help get them settled in New Zealand, Losena and Kilifi gave them all their old furniture, including whiteware. The Mafile'os needed a house-load of furniture but were loath to put it on hire purchase, so Kilifi got a part-time job cleaning banks in Avondale, Mt Albert and Ponsonby after work for \$200 a week. Losena would go along and help him, halving the workload and the time it took.

Even so, for six months they would start work at their usual jobs before dawn and not be home until close to midnight. As soon as they noticed being absent for long hours had started to affect their children's behaviour, they decided it was time to quit. "We always expect our children to sleep at 8.30," says Kilifi. "Then we went home and found our children walking outside. It was about 11 o'clock at night. From that time I thought we had enough money in the bank for furniture, I tell my wife, I'm going to go tomorrow and tell my boss, 'Find someone else to do the cleaning'."

When most of us don't have money to buy something we want, we probably put it in the too-hard basket.

When Kilifi decided the children needed a computer for their schoolwork, he sought an alternative solution. He enrolled for a programme called Computers in Homes that helps low-income families access computers and, despite working two jobs, still managed to attend a two-hour computer training course every week for a month. At the end of the course he got given a basic, but adequate, home PC. "That's the only chance we had to get a computer," says Losena. "We knew if we didn't want to sacrifice our time to do it, we wouldn't get the computer."

The Mafile'os make sure the money they do have goes a long way. They have devised their own careful budget and tenaciously keep to a savings plan. "We decided to make sure we always have money on the side, even if we have none at all in the hand," says Losena. This means that in the weeks when the mortgage is due, they have only \$200 to survive on.

They are saving to renovate the house, adding on more bedrooms, and to support the kids through university. Working for Families has eased the pressure, providing payments of \$212 a week. The Mafile'os call this the "kids' money" and try to reserve it for school camps, piano lessons and other educational expenses. Holidays are out. Christmas breaks are spent at home. Losena and Kilifi have not been back to Tonga since they emigrated. They have no budget for entertainment.

THE MAFILE'O CHILDREN (FROM LEFT) CLIFFORD, 6, MOSA'ATI, 13, AMALANI, 4, AND CECELIA, 11. OFTEN THE FAMILY DON'T GET HOME UNTIL AFTER 6.30PM, LEAVING JUST ENOUGH TIME FOR HOMEWORK AND DINNER BEFORE BEDTIME. THEY HAVE A FAMILY RULE — NO TELEVISION ON WEEKNIGHTS.

Losena says the family's closest thing to a night out is Thursday evenings when Mosa'ati, Cecelia and Clifford go to St John's youth cadets. In summer time, the family like heading straight from school and work to Pt Chevalier beach for a play in the water and picnic tea of KFC.

Thursdays are pay day, so while the children are busy at St John's, Kilifi and Losena head to the supermarket for a hassle-free big shop. They find it much easier to control spending if they buy groceries for the week before the money is whittled away.

Every other day of the week, Losena cooks a dinner at home and everyone gathers around the large kitchen table to discuss the day. Family favourites are chop suey, butter chicken, taro leaves and potato salad. Picky eaters aren't tolerated at the dinner table.

"If the kids are eating something and they're fussy about it we explain that you have to work to get the money to always get the food that you want," says Losena. "If you're fussy and you don't want to work, you're going to go hungry. No one's going to come and



KILIFI IS GREETED BY A FELLOW MEMBER OF THE TONGAN SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH WITH FOUR-YEAR-OLD AMALANI, WHO HAS AMBITIONS OF BECOMING A MINISTER ONE DAY.

give you some food or some money.”

There are always plenty of eggs, thanks to the plump, white hen living in the back garden. The hen mysteriously went missing once. A month later she casually wandered back up the driveway, much to her owners’ delight. Following her disappearance, the hen went off the lay for a while, but with a diet of rice she is back to laying up to half a dozen huge eggs a day.

On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday there is barely time for dinner and homework before bedtime. The family don’t get home until 6.30pm because they wait until 6pm to pick Mosa’ati up from the I Have a Dream programme he has participated in for the past six years.

Mosa’ati was in a class at Wesley Primary “adopted” by software developer and philanthropist Scott Gilmour. Statistically, fewer than three of Mosa’ati’s group of 53 schoolmates at the decile-one school would be expected to attend university. Gilmour has pledged to pay the university fees for all the “dreamers” who reach tertiary level and provides tutoring and mentoring to help them on their way.

Already Mosa’ati has experienced success at aiming high. “I set myself the goal of being head boy of Wesley Intermediate, and I got it,” he beams. His long-term dream is to become a judge. He’s in the debating club at school and can keep up his side of a conversation on politics, knowledgeably discussing John Key’s clumsy comments on the “peaceful” formation of New Zealand.

Influenced by Mosa’ati’s drive, each of the younger Mafle’os also has a dream for what they want to be when they grow up. Cecelia has set her sights on becoming a doctor, Clifford wants to be an architect and Amalani a minister. They won’t have Gilmour’s financial backing when it comes time to go to university but their parents are focused on being able to offer them the same opportunity.

Little Amalani was certainly at home in church the day *Metro* visited, sleeping peacefully in his grandmother’s arms during the sermon. The Mafle’os attend the Tongan Seventh-day Adventist Church in Mt Wellington, which holds services on Saturday mornings. This prevents Mosa’ati playing Saturday morning sport, surely to the disappointment of Mt Albert Grammar rugby. A towering 13-year-old at 1.65m with square shoulders, he has the build of a handy front-rower.

The Mafle’os turn up to the service looking immaculate. Losena has traded her high-vis polar-fleece work

clothes for a floaty fuchsia dress and draped her shoulders with a white crochet scarf. Kilifi is sharp in a dark navy suit. Clifford looks like a mini-version of his dad in his own dapper suit. His wavy, black hair is brushed out, not braided into its usual long plait.

The Mafle’os sit together on the right-hand side of the church with other young families. Mosa’ati belts out the hymns in a strong baritone. His leadership qualities have already been recognised here, with other church-goers nicknaming him the “minister”.

As if the weekdays aren’t busy enough, the Mafle’os have a full schedule at weekends. Losena and Kilifi voluntarily take aerobics classes on Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings at their church and another in Mangere. Called Downsize, they teach a programme of healthy eating and exercise designed to help people in the Tongan community to address risk factors that can lead to heart disease, diabetes and obesity.

Every second weekend, Kilifi leads Pathfinders, a Seventh-day Adventist version of Scouts for young people aged 10 to 18. The group of 36 youths do community service, marching, go on trips, study the *Bible* and partake in activities like learning bush survival skills.

Mosa’ati’s timetable tacked in the hallway near his bedroom door says it all. He points out his only free times of the week — Sunday evening and Friday evening.

Kilifi and Losena are weighing up whether working two low-paid jobs is the wisest decision or if the family would be better off with one parent not working and able to spend more time at home. This would entitle them to claim more Government support.

The outcome of this year’s election may influence their decision. Losena has always voted Labour and says she will probably continue the tradition come November.

Kilifi keeps his political cards closer to his chest, and says he is waiting to see what policies National will reveal as polling day approaches before he makes up his mind. Last election campaign, Don Brash visited his factory and made a speech promising flexible hours, telling employees they would be able to work two hours one day and make up the extra time another day. Kilifi was sceptical his bosses would allow that.

He’s a father with a firm grip on reality and is willing to reassess his careful plan to achieve the best outcome for his family’s future. “We find things tough, but we don’t want to get away from it. You have to face it because this is how life is.”