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COVER STORY

Modern Family

Evanna Ramly



The couple with their adorable newborn, Shaelyn

A- **A** **A+**

Carey Ng has come a long way since representing Malaysia at the Miss Universe pageant in 2013. Apart from landing magazine covers and television commercials, the former ballerina and rhythmic gymnast has been busy emceeing events and galas, and even held the post of national director in the Miss Universe Malaysia Organisation from 2014 - 2016.

More recently, she has been juggling her career with a couple of newer roles – wife to F&B entrepreneur Roen Cian Nagapan and mother to baby Shaelyn Rey, who was born in September this year.

“Family is where your foundation of love begins. It teaches you what love is and it’s where you always retreat, no matter what happens in your life,” says the 29-year-old. “I’m super Asian in the sense that family is very important to me. I was brought up that way and as was my husband so we’re going to make sure it stays intact with our little family as well.”

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Being part of a family is one thing, being the head is another. “Roan and I got married because we knew we wanted a family of our own. We hope to establish our own traditions and start something of our own that we both truly cherish, with values and principles that we believe in. When you come from very different families, you want to have a good mix of things from either side.”

Ng believes embracing such responsibility feels very different only because she and her husband now bear the responsibility to lead by example.

“We have to set good examples and be the first to establish trends for the family to follow. Now with a baby, it solidifies the need for strong principles and values. It’s no longer simply mirroring what your mother and father do, or what they did for you as a child; now it’s very different because we have to make our own decisions.”

She discovers that this takes immeasurable hard work and investment in terms of time, commitment and communication. “We have to be on the same page because if we’re not then it’s going to be trouble,” she laughs. “It’s a whole new adventure.”

While she has always been relatively conscientious – “The playful one has always been my husband, and even then he’s quite family-oriented” – motherhood has made her even more so. “It’s changed me because now I’m responsible for this new human being. Everything I do and say will make an impact in her life.”



Ng hopes to see changes in Malaysia's education system

Baby Shae, who is present at the interview, may not understand everything her mother does but she is quick to pick up on her tone, energy and mood. “All that will mould her early

childhood, determining how receptive she is to education and whether she's going to be a very curious or curbed kid. It starts from now so I have no reason to think of anything else but my kid. That's why I'm trying to achieve a work-life balance because I'm so engrossed in my little family at the moment."

The most important lesson she has learned is that there is no real right and wrong. "With so many things on the internet and countless advice from your parents and friends, ultimately it all comes down to having that confidence in yourself, to know that you're giving your child the best. What your parents had done years ago may not be the best now. You do get overwhelmed with information but as long as you do it with love and good intentions then I think we'll be ok."

Patience and perseverance are key. "You have to be patient with yourself, with a crying baby and with learning new things. You're never going to be just a natural at everything, even if they say it should come naturally to a mother. You learn everything from breastfeeding to the mistakes you make when your baby gets sick. You just have to persevere."

A season for bonding

The family is looking forward to celebrating Shae's first Christmas together. "Our core family has always celebrated Christmas; with our extended family, we celebrated Chinese New Year. Roen was in the UK during the early years of his childhood and picked up on the Christmas spirit quite young," she says. "As we close one chapter and enter a new year, it's the season when you just want to be around family. It's a time to be closer to people you love."

Her favourite Christmas memories are the presents. "I remember I had so many things on my wish list. When I was younger I used to love Barbie dolls and you know how popular they were back then. We went to Toys "R" Us and that was the only time of the year we got to choose what we like. I really appreciate my parents giving us gifts that we wanted for Christmas. Looking back, I would say it was crazy – too many dolls for one girl to play with!"

As for plans for Shae's first Christmas, Ng says that her daughter is still too young to appreciate the festivities. "We've already discussed what new traditions we want to start. We talked about buying a new Christmas tree. It would be nice if we could keep the Christmas tree for a long time and decorate it together. We will pick out a special ornament for Shae every year, and keep that collection growing as the years go by."

This year, Roen's family and Ng will also be travelling to Singapore to meet his brother, whose wife recently became pregnant. "We'll be celebrating that as well as Shae's 100 days on Christmas. But I don't think she will remember the gifts until she is two or three, though."

Ng has yet to decide whether she should tell Shae about Santa. "Should you? He's not even real."

She turns to her mother and asks if she and her siblings were ever taught about Santa. Mum confirms that she never did but the children saw him in shopping malls anyway. “How do you explain Santa?” the young mother muses, imagining a dialogue between Shae and herself. “Do I say, ‘He’s a fictional character’, and she asks, ‘What’s fictional, Mum?’. There would be a lot more explaining to do. At the end of the day, I just want her to have her own memories.”

Little surprise the family is big on food. “It’s nice having the full Christmas spread – everything from the roast to the smell of cinnamon. We want to make sure it’s really festive for Shae.”

She and Roen may not have prioritised celebrations when they were just a twosome but that changed as soon as Shae arrived. They realised they did not want her to miss out on celebrating all the different festivals. “Of course, we’ll be sure to celebrate other holidays like Deepavali and Chinese New Year, too. There will be open houses with delicious food and angpow, and we will teach her how to address her elders. All these things are the basis of who we are as Asians and we want to preserve that. We’re trying now to refresh all our childhood memories so that we can pass them down to her. Hopefully, we can make it happen and teach her the spirit of giving.”



Ng won Miss Universe Malaysia in 2013

A real partnership

Currently, the couple is working on their own childhood education centre, which they hope to launch in the first quarter of next year. “I want to work closely with more meaningful projects because of Shae. This is the right time to set up a business that caters to our life. Besides being relevant, it creates an environment for us to work with our child in mind as well.”

Their new focus mirrors their professional advancement. “We’ve always moved our careers organically. Roen is delving further into sports and health with a lot less night-work. We want to engineer our life to become more family-oriented.”

She admits it is challenging to continue doing what she used to do all the time before she was with child. “When I was pregnant, I thought about this really hard because I could already feel the shift of career happening. We can do something that matches our lifestyle and creates an avenue for us to spend more time with our kid.”

Ng intends for the education centre to apply the Reggio Emilia philosophy, a pedagogy described as student-centred and constructivist as it utilises self-directed experiential learning in relationship-driven environments. “My focus is on creating a stimulating programme for the curious child,” she adds. “It’s so important for children to find their own tools and explore the environment around them before they reach full problem-solving potential.”

With regards to children’s education in Malaysia, she would like to see less spoon-feeding and more creativity. “Every mind is full of wonder in early childhood, full of great potential, and it is important to cultivate that. Our curriculum should focus on guiding rather than hand-holding.”

As an architecture graduate, Ng will naturally be overseeing this aspect of the centre as well. “The design of the centre is very important in encouraging the inquisitive minds of children. It will have to be out of the box.”

This article first appeared in Focus Malaysia Issue 264.