My three sons

Ralph Barrera and Gretchen Heber AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Ralph Barrera and son Reece share some quiet time at home weeks after Reece, who is now 2, was born prematurely. He now has twin brothers.

Photographer Ralph Barrera has his hands full, and he loves it. On this Father's Day weekend, his family shares some special moments of the past 2 years.

Sometimes the path to fatherhood can be a little like a car ad: zero to 60 in no time flat.

For Ralph Barrera, it's been an exhausting, wild journey from no kids to three kids in less than two years.

But fatherhood had a bittersweet beginning for Ralph, an American-Statesman photographer.

When his first son, Reece, was born the day after Easter 2000, Ralph's natural instinct would have been to share the happy news with his parents. Instead, life's greatest gift — the birth of a child — was tempered by one of life's greatest sorrows — the loss of a parent. Ralph's father had died just one day earlier. And his mother's death a few months before compounded the ache.

Perhaps it is that dichotomous start that gave Ralph the fortitude to survive his next challenge of fatherhood: twins! Born when Reece was not quite 20 months old, Caden and Mason are everything you'd imagine twins to be: engaging, adorable, boisterous and oh so exhausting. Add the toddler to the party, and it's clear that Ralph's dance card is more than full. Yet he treasures each and every turn on the floor — even the long, frightening, unpredictable weeks in the intensive care unit where the boys, all three having been born prematurely, spent the first tumultuous days of their lives.

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Taking a photo of all four Barrera men — 5-month-olds Caden, left, and Mason, dad Ralph and 2-year-old Reece — can be quite a feat. Moments later, no one was happy.

Chronicling the growth of his three sons has been among Ralph's greatest joys, and we are pleased to share some of those photographs with you this Father's Day weekend.

A scratch golfer who's had to put away his clubs for a while, Ralph's thrilled to have his own permanent foursome and can't wait 'til the day he'll take the boys out on the course.

The boys' mother also looks forward to the day when her husband gets those boys out of the house for hours on the links. I know this with certainty because I'm that mother and I'm as proud as I can be of the man who is my boys' Dad.

— Gretchen Heber

Turn to page D14 for more photos of the Barrera boys.