



### *My Mother, My Hero*

The most heroic person I know is my mother. She couldn't provide material things, but the values she instilled in me and my siblings took us further than anything money could buy.

After she and my father divorced she became a single mother. But through it all, my mother never complained. She even chastised me for mildly rebuking him once when he spoke roughly to her on the telephone. She said I was disrespectful to an elder and forced me to call him back and apologize. That was a life-lesson learned—respect for even those who might have wronged you, and especially for elders.

Although I was a child, I still sensed her anxiety in raising six kids alone. She never seemed to have any fun and her only release was to chain smoke. She was always tired; at times she fell asleep holding a cigarette. Mom worked days and many nights to keep a roof over our head and food on the table. Cleaning people's houses and being a care-giver for their elderly

parents didn't pay much, but she stretched it as far as it could go. Marietta Jessup didn't believe in welfare—she taught us that hard work would pay off in the long run. And it did. Many of the people she cared for were very generous to her in their wills.

To ensure that we also knew the value of hard work, she gave us more responsibilities as kids than most folks have in a lifetime. As my younger siblings got older, they, too, had chores. There was no sleeping late on Saturdays. Mom got us started so early we usually finished our chores before ten. My sister Theresa's job was to clean the house every Saturday. She was eleven years old. I can still see her on her hands and knees, sloshing water as she scrubbed the kitchen floor. We didn't have much, but what we had, Mom insisted it be kept clean.

My job, as a ten-year-old, was to keep the front porch filled with wood during the frigid Virginia winters. That meant going to the woodpile at the back of the house—we lived on three acres of land so back was *really* back!—and chop firewood for our wood-burning stove. The stove sat in the living room and was the only source of heat for our drafty three-bedroom house. Then I'd carry load after load to the front until the entire porch was stacked with wood. I'm talking about making more trips to and from that woodpile than I care to remember.

We didn't have plumbing, so 12-year-old Phyllis, the oldest of five girls, always accompanied my mother to the store to fill two 20-gallon buckets with water, helping her load the heavy containers into the trunk of our car. We also got water from a wine barrel my mom put out to catch rain off the roof. That was used for nightly "baths" in a foot tub on the porch. There was no bathroom. We used an outhouse during the day and a chamber pot at night.

Life was hard. My family was the last in our close-knit community to get a telephone; even then it was a party-line, shared by others. We were last to get a television, too. Mom

couldn't buy gifts at Christmas and we didn't expect any, but my aunts and uncle always bought us something. I can't explain it, but when I became a teenager, I became acutely aware of my hand-to-mouth existence, feeling deprived compared to that of my classmates. It was clear to me that hardship would always be my fate in life so why even dream about bettering my condition. I became a rebel. I didn't care about school, so I got poor grades. I fought with my sisters, my classmates, and my sharp tongue alienated everyone around me. I became my mother's worst nightmare, getting so many whippings I became immune to them. After about a year of this delinquent, unruly behavior, Mom had had enough. That's when she taught another life lesson: When the going gets tough, the tough get going. She literally dragged me to the car, (a 1957 Chevy in 1970), and drove to a store that had a pay phone. (We were still phoneless). My father lived in Baltimore, so when she called *him* up, I knew that the situation had reached a breaking point. I was five years old when my father left. Later in life, when I realized he'd abandoned us, I became angry and negative towards him. Truth be told, he put the fear of God in me and I hated him for leaving us.

My mom told him she was going to do one of two things: either ship me off to him or to reform school—either way I was outta her house! My mother was a serious person, not one to make idle threats. My dad got on the phone saying if I came to live with him, "I'll damn sho' straighten her out—one way or another!". I wasn't sure how he planned to do it, but based on the things he said to me, I had no desire to find out.

Mom and I rode home in ominous silence. She took the other kids to the store, ordering me to stay in the bedroom until she decided what she was going to do with me. Filled with despair, I decided suicide was my only way out and got the ax from the woodpile. Well, I put that sharp, cold, steel to my neck and it came to me, "*This is probably going to hurt.*" So I slid

the ax under my bed and tried to come up with some *real* solutions because I knew Mom meant business and the thought of leaving my family terrified me. I was alone in that room for six hours, plenty of time to ponder my past choices and the two that marked my future. After some serious thinking, I made a decision.

When Mom returned I ran to her. Talking fast, I promised to change, straighten up and not cause any more trouble; I begged her forgiveness and to please not send me away. I even shed some tears. She gave me that second chance and I never, I mean *never* brought her grief again. As my grades and attitude improved, so did my relationship with my family, teachers, neighbors. I will always be grateful to my mom for her lesson in tough love. It changed my life.

I became an honor student and attended college via a co-operative work program. I was twenty-one when I got my first real job with the Navy. From then on, Mom was treated like the queen she deserved to be and she didn't have to work another day in her life. One of the first things I did was put in a well. Mom proudly watched me and my siblings carve our initials in the concrete as the well was being built. She never wanted a whole lot, but I made sure she was comfortable for the rest of her life—putting in running water, air conditioning, and enough money to spend and pay her bills. Mom had never been one to whine about her lot in life, taking everything in stride. It was the least I could do, putting into action all the values, she, my hero, had instilled in me.

Mom passed away over thirty years ago; Dad, at 91 is still here. My siblings and I get together at least once a year at my house to reminisce, telling the same old stories that the younger generation seem to never tire of—especially the time my brother accidentally set the woods behind our house on fire. As we fellowship and chat about Mom's fried sweet potatoes

and try to duplicate her rice pudding recipe, her presence is always near and her values continue to live through us.



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