

Mother knew best

BY JAMES A. MEROLLA / SUN CHRONICLE STAFF

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One spring day, sunk deep within the roots of my childhood memories, I wanted to corral something that couldn't or shouldn't be corralled. I took my grandmother's bushel basket (now empty of its brown potatoes), a foot-long stick I found in the yard and about 30 feet of thin, white string, and made a makeshift bird trap.

I placed hunks of bread in a small circle and scattered other pieces of bread across the yard, leading to that circle. I tied the string to the stick, then tilted the basket upside down and propped it up with the stick. I ran the string in a straight line to my hiding place behind an old, brick outdoor fireplace aside my grandfather's dilapidated tool shed.

I waited for what seemed like days for a bird to peck at the bread in a line, eventually hopping under the basket — my cue to pull the string, yanking the stick into the stratosphere and dropping the bushel basket upon the unaware bird.

Although they pecked around the basket, I never caught one.

My mother watched my lack of progress over the course of an entire Saturday. Somewhere, I suppose, she admired my pluck, my ingenuity, my patience, if not my methods.

When I finally went into the house, she lifted my chin.

“James,” she said. “Whatever you do in life, don't shed your own light under a bushel. No one will ever see it there.”

It was the best advice she ever gave me. That other stuff was, well, for the birds.

Here, on Mother's Day, we asked some notable persons in our area — who didn't shed their individual light under any bushels — one simple, similar question: “What was the best advice your mother ever gave you?”

Plainville Police Chief Edward “ Ned” Merrick, who also heads the Massachusetts Chiefs of Police Association:

“ My mother died when I was 11. She got caught in the polio epidemic in 1955. There were 10 of us in our family. There were nine kids. I tell you, if you didn't make your bed every single day, you'd usually have a problem when you came home. And it would usually involve a dust pan brush. Those things are nasty.

“ She believed in the saying, `Cleanliness is next to Godliness.’”

Dore VanDyke, executive director of the Attleboro Museum, Center for the Arts:

“ My mom was tough'85. meaning, not hard on us, but she had high expectations. There was one piece of advice she got through HER mother, which was, basically, be kind to and listen to others and put yourself in their place. Be a person who helps others.

“ We always took care of others. We learned that what you give is not as important as what you get back by giving.”

Dan LeBrun, developmental director at the New Hope women's shelter and organizer/leader of the annual Gourmet Guys fundraising event:

“ I don't know if she ever said these words exactly, but she told me something like, `If you try your best, good things will happen.' That has become my general perspective on life.”

And has he found it to be true? “ Absolutely. It's sage and beneficial advice for life.”

Dale Rogers Marshall, a social scientist and outgoing president of Wheaton College in Norton:

“ My mother, Adele Langston Rogers, had a law degree from Cornell University and was always very active in supporting my father's work as U.S. Attorney General for (President) Eisenhower and as U.S. Secretary of State for (President) Nixon. At the same time she raised four children.

“ Her advice usually took the form of setting an example rather than telling us what to do. What we learned from watching her was the importance of genuine caring for the people in your life regardless of who they are. For decades she volunteered to help teachers in inner schools and was

a strong advocate for her students. For decades she traveled on my father's trips, reaching out to teachers in schools and patients in hospitals and craftspeople and artists in countries throughout the world.

“ She always felt a special bond with children and young people. At the same time, we knew that her own family was her top priority and we saw how happy she was. So I grew up respecting that path and have always tried to follow her example.”

Luciano Canova, owner of Luciano's restaurant on Route 1 in Wrentham and Lake Pearl Luciano's, also in Wrentham:

“ I was raised just outside of Rome, in a small village. I've been here 30 years. In Italy, the way you grow up is very, very close to your family. You sit down at the table with (a lot) of pride. Very family-oriented. The Italian people are usually very warm.

“ My mother always said, ‘Be always a good man, as you go along, and you're going to be rewarded. Be very good to people and stay out of trouble.’ I think that's what all mothers tell you, no?”

Jonathan Kraft, vice president of the New England Patriots and son of team owners Bob and Myra Kraft:

Kraft said that his mother had always been a philanthropist who “ taught me the value of giving to others.” He said she didn't have a catch phrase or one-sentence bit of philosophy, but she and the Kraft family taught by example by donating to the community.

“ Does she have one saying she lives by? Not really,” he said, but added that he learned by watching the amount of time his mother Myra gave by serving on area committees, giving to others, volunteering. He said it is a quality he wants to instill in his own children, her philosophy of “ giving back.”

Erica Pavao, 17, the 2003 valedictorian at Attleboro High School who plans to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in September:

“ I don't think I could select the most important things my mother has ever said to me. I mean, I couldn't even tell you every bit of advice she's ever given me.

“ My mother advises me on numerous topics, from my poor eating habits, or so she thinks, and the cleanliness of my room, or, of course, the lack thereof. She and my father impose responsibility on me by not handing everything over on a silver platter, because life is not like that.

“ And even though I've always been a bit of an optimist, she often brings me down from my cloud, not as a pessimist, but as a realist. With her, nothing is ever sugar-coated and I respect her for that.”

Jeanne Hebert of North Attleboro, mother of three, director of marketing for the New England Dairy Promotion Board (“ The Power of Cheese” campaign) and recent contestant on the CBS “ reality” game show “ Survivor” in the Amazon:

“ My mom passed away six years ago. Her best advice to me were the last words she wrote me in a letter. She knew her time was limited. The advice came when she said, ‘Don't think of my last day as something bad. Celebrate life. Just make sure you enjoy and love the simple things in life.’ And my life is so gratifying now that I live by those words.”

U.S. Rep. James McGovern, D-Worcester, who represents several communities in The Sun Chronicle circulation area, including Attleboro and North Attleboro:

McGovern said the advice his mother most often gave him and his sisters was one of her favorite lines: “ Always treat everyone you meet the same, with respect and courtesy.”

Marilyn Godfrey, president of the Attleboro Area Council for Children, a member of the Attleboro Homeless Coalition and Hunger Network, and organizer of the annual Christmas is For Kids charity gift-giving drive:

“ My mother died when I was 19 years old. She did get to see my children and the one thing she told me was to always make sure that your family is number one and to always give to your community. So it's her fault I'm involved in all of these things!

“ My mother was a woman ahead of her time. My mom was always feeding the hungry and clothing the poor. When you are young you don't realize what it meant, but, looking back, I came to realize how important that is.”

Paul Spera of Attleboro, decorated Vietnam veteran, local veterans leader and former National Commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars:

“ I guess the best advice my mother ever gave me would be to help others, basically, as a way of showing appreciation for the things we have in our own lives and for the people who have helped us along the way; to be involved in other people's lives and to try to find ways to help people to solve their problems.

“ That's what has kept me involved in veterans issues as a way of saying thank you to all of the people who touched my life in some small way. My mother always told me we should do that and we've always tried to do it.”

Louise Pettitt of Attleboro, professional singer, voice teacher and founder of the Chaminade Opera Group in Norton:

“ I just followed her example. She was just a perfectly honest and dedicated person to helping other people. She was always behind me in everything I did.

“ I can't remember anything she said specifically, but my own saying has been this. It comes from Shakespeare (‘Hamlet’):

‘This above all: to thine own self be true,

And it must follow, as the night the day,

Thou canst not then be false to any man.’ ”

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