

International Women's Day

When my sister Seija and I were very young, we weren't allowed to have Barbies. My mom, Patricia Cassidy, took one look at those tall, thin, blonde haired and blue eyed dolls and didn't care for the body image message they were sending her young, impressionable daughters. She kept them out of our hands as long as she possibly could. We never had an easy bake oven, kitchenette set or toy grocery cart either. For a time I was partially convinced that she was in some type of crusade against my happiness or perhaps she was anti-fun altogether. As it turns out what she was crusading against, was sexism. She conceded that she was never going to be able to prevent me from belting out the entire musical score of every Disney princess movie, so to help even the playing field she embraced my interest in dinosaurs, bought us books with female characters, purchased a Lego spaceship and when my fascination with cars hit a fever pitch I got my car mat and set of Hot Wheels. Before the negative impact of gender based marketing and play became a part of the mainstream conversation, my mom was taking strides to ensure we knew there was more to being a girl than literally giving up your voice to marry the prince or pretending to wash dishes in a child sized replica kitchen. Looking back now, I realize these were among the first of a lifetime of lessons. Lessons that define the woman she is and the woman she hoped Seija and I would grow to be.

In elementary school she pulled me from a Thanksgiving Day celebration. As a 1st or 2nd grader I really wanted to colour in my pictures, make headbands, dress up and eat pretend Thanksgiving dinner on fake Plymouth rock, however my mom was looking at the bigger picture. Guaranteeing that I begin to learn an accurate recounting of the Indigenous experience of colonization was far more valuable than my 7 year old need for pageantry. She knew she would not be able to teach me everything I needed to know at that tender age, however sweeping truth under the rug would be a disservice to my education and more importantly to Indigenous communities who were (and still are) being denied their past in favour of a grossly distorted and whitewashed version of North American history. She may not have been able to deliver reconciliation single-handedly but she was determined to make whatever difference she could, no matter how small.

Soon after, standardized testing would begin to make waves in Ontario elementary classrooms. EQAO tests were to become the yardstick by which every student was measured regardless of cultural differences, learning styles or abilities. Music, art and physical education classes were all compromised for "test prep" and immense pressure was being placed on teachers to score well above all else. There was nothing about the introduction of large scale testing that sat well with my mom, and to that end I never participated in a single standardized test that was not absolutely mandatory in order for me to pass the grade or graduate high school. She didn't pull me from school because she didn't value education. She pulled me because she did. She believed art, music and gym were as essential to a child's development as math and language. How well we understood what was being taught to us was far more valuable than my 4th grade ability to regurgitate arithmetic and grammar tenses. I am certain there were phone calls from teachers and meetings with administrators about how they could change her mind. I am sure they felt with the Ontario government on their side they would be an unstoppable force, however Patricia standing in her convictions is truly an immovable object.

What is most important to know is that she never took these decisions lightly, because we never (I seriously mean never) missed school. We never took a single family trip while classes were in session (from JK through Carleton), I was never kept home because she or my dad had a day off (which likely has something to do with either of them ever taking a day off), and I had to complete Patricia assigned homework on nearly every holiday or PD Day. Did I think it was extreme? You bet. I just wanted to be

doing what my classmates were doing. Instead she taught us consistency and accountability; school was our job and we would be showing up come hell or high water. As I became older she policed me less as my desire to be considered someone reliable grew; I wanted to be counted on. This was the rock solid foundation upon which my concepts of work ethic and responsibility were built. I wouldn't trade them for all the holidays in the world.

For the record she also did all the regular mom things. Put on band aids, embarrassed me in front of my friends, grounded me, went to the school play multiple times and made up ridiculous nick names. I love and appreciate her endlessly for the countless sacrifices she made so Seija and I could have everything.

I am sure people think all of this must have been lost on her young daughters. How much could we have possibly understood? What difference could she really have made? That's the other thing about my mom. She's always playing the long game.

None of the decisions she made were easy and their lessons were not learned as the result of a singular conversation. Parenting, like any good revolution, is not a one time event. She fought hard to be taken seriously, she fought for what she believed in and she fought so one day we might not have to. She remained undaunted in her quest to bring up informed and empowered daughters during a time when women were still to be seen and not heard.

She never bent to our or anyone else's will if she felt it would compromise the women she was raising us to be. It is what sets her apart and it is what I am most thankful for. The reasons she rallied against the status quo were and are a direct reflection of her devotion to motherhood and her unwavering ideals.

She believes in putting your money where your mouth is. Agreeing to disagree, but never compromising your values in the process. We learned it was OK not to know everything, but it was no excuse to stop learning. That showing up isn't just half the battle, it's a hallmark of your character. She taught by example that "opinionated" is not a dirty word. That we should always be ready to debate what is right by having our facts straight and morality in check. That in order to be hopeful about the future you must be active in the present. She knew she wouldn't always be there to explain what was right and wrong, so she raised me to be thoughtful and critical; to ask questions and challenge the existing condition. To always check for blind spots in my privilege. To say something when I see something. Not to worry about being the only one, because often times the right thing is not the popular thing.

She taught me that nobody is doing life perfectly, that we won't always see eye to eye, that mistakes are inevitable but if you really believe in something, in your heart, it will always guide you home in the end.

"Never grow a wishbone, daughter, where your backbone ought to be." Clementine Paddleford