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Walking Through Life With A Bounce In His Step

A Tribute to my Dad on Father's day 2008

by Richard Naegele

My dad was born in 1924. He was in high school at Whitesboro Central School when WWII broke out. He joined the Army in his senior year of high school and received a GED diploma while in the Army Air Corps. During WWII, he served as a waist gunner on B-24's and B-25's, serving in the Pacific Theater.

He married my mother in 1945, and became a father for the first time in February 1947, when I popped into the world. In 1950, my mother had my younger brother, and shortly thereafter, Dad was called up to serve in the US Air Force during the Korean Conflict. My sister was born in 1953.

My father's whole life experience revolved around the joys, the sorrows and the responsibility of fatherhood. He and Mom, dedicated their lives to us kids and to each other. We are very fortunate to have the wonderful memories of a stable and loving home life, to look back on in our adult years.

My dad only stood about 5'6" on his tallest days. He was on the short side, but long on heart and ambition.

My memories are all about his walk through life with a

bounce in his step, even though life often placed stumbling blocks in his path.

In the 50's families didn't have two or three cars. My mom used to get up early and drive Dad to work so that she might keep the car for the day. We would pick dad up at work at Chicago Pneumatic on Bleecker St. when he got off at 3:30 PM. As we sat in the parking lot, a city bus would pull into the "bus loop" and other wives would line the driveway and roadside, waiting for their husbands.

Suddenly the doors would swing open, and a river of employees would pour through them and start to move toward the parking lots. The sidewalk ran along the front of the building, and even as short as my father was, I could always pick him out from the rest of the crowd. While many of the workers walked, with fatigue evident in their walk, my dad always "bounced" along with his lunch box tucked under his arm, and his thumb hooked in his belt. He bounced above all the taller people, and walked with enthusiasm, and energy in his step., scanning the parked cars for ours. There were times when after a long hot day in the plant, he would actually jog to the car, to enable us to beat the surging hoard of cars heading back into the city along Bleecker St.

My memories of Dad, were always of his ambition, and his love for his family. He eventually was unable to work as a machinist and toolmaker, due to an allergy he developed to the solvents involved. He then operated a gas station in the daytime and went to college at night, to get a degree in mechanical engineering. He was able to get a position at UNIVAC in Ilion as he became a qualified draftsman, and later completed his work to become a full fledged engineer. He then worked the gas station from 7:30 AM to 2 PM. That gave him time to jump in the shower and change clothes and be in Ilion for 3:30 PM start of his shift.

The wondrous part of life with my dad was his ability and desire to "walk through life with a bounce in his step." My mom had many health issues when she was young, and there was always medical bills to pay, and times when she was hospitalized and he was tasked with caring for us kids, working and visiting her in the hospital. He managed to multi-task and accomplish all that, and still have "the familiar bounce in his step" and a smile on his face for us kids.

My dad could work all day, eat his supper, play with us kids, spend time with mom in the evening, and still have energy left to show enthusiasm and love when he tucked us into bed at night.

Dad's weekends were filled with family activity. I

never remember my dad “going out with the guys.” He always was content and eager to spend time doing fun things with mom and us kids. We had very little money, but we were always happy, packing a picnic basket and taking a ride in the car. We would end up eating our lunch in some scenic cool place under trees, or along a creek, and to us, it was as much fun as going to Disneyland.

As I got older, he took me fishing, attended my little league baseball games, took me to scouts, and took the family camping. He was never too tired for us, and he always had that “bounce in his step” no matter how long he had worked or how tired he was. He normally had a smile, and seldom a frown for anyone.

He was a strong disciplinarian, but fair and loving. He might beat my butt one minute, and hug me and tell me how much he loved me the next.

When I was grown, and had a son of my own, Dad still had that bounce in his step, the same enthusiasm for life, and an eagerness to share it with my son. My oldest boy recently came and got Grandma and Grandpa’s dining room table from my garage. He wanted it because in his own words, “it was where he learned to color, learned to write, learned to read, and learned his numbers.” All of this was the summer BEFORE he went to school.

All of Dad’s grandchildren have those same wonderful memories of learning and playing games with Dad at that table. He has the patience of a saint, and loved children all of his life. I learned to read before I went to school also.

My father was 84 on his last birthday. He has spent the last 61 of those years dedicated to the responsibility and the joy of fatherhood. He has been a true “Patriarch” to our family. I have NO bad memories of my father. He has been my hero for my entire 61 years on this earth and still is to this day.

Fathers today could learn a lot of life’s lessons from my dad. He never laid down or rolled over when times got tough. His eyes were always on the goal of providing a good life for his family, and in my 61 years, I cannot remember him ever failing at anything that he attempted to accomplish.

He never took a night off to get drunk, or to go bowling with the “boys.” He never took a dollar for himself, that could be utilized to do something for either my mom or us kids.

We ate well, we always were taken care of with love and concern, and we had all that our friends had. My

dad worked harder than some, but if I wanted a bike, I got one. My first transistor radio was smaller than my friend’s was, and my first stereo record player didn’t have a record changer, but Dad worked overtime to insure that those things were under the tree on Christmas morning. My friends had new bikes and I had a used one from Endres Cycle shop when they were located on Baggs square, but I had a bike to ride. My bike was used, but a top of the line schwinn, while my friend’s new bikes were cheapies from National Auto or Grants. Mine had a shock absorber and green US Royal tires. That bike carried me all over the city, until I finally bought a new one myself with money from a paper route.

My dad taught us kids a work ethic that is unheard of in the lives of today’s children. I worked mowing lawns for 50 cents a lawn from the 5th grade onward. I worked on a farm from the time I was 14. I had paper routes, and I put money in the bank. My proudest moment was when I went to National Auto and bought my dad a riding lawnmower for Father’s day 1964. It cost a grand total of \$99.

As my dad’s energy fades, and the light in his eyes grows dimmer by the day, I reflect on the wonderful life that he insured us kids would enjoy. I will be sad for myself when he passes away. It will leave a horrible hole in my life here on earth, but I will be rejoicing in the knowledge that he has rejoined my mom. His mate of 59 years, and the love of his life. My dad is my hero, but even heroes have to die.

My hero will live on forever though, in my heart and in my memories. On this Father’s day 2008, I want to pay tribute to my dad. He has lived a long and happy life. There have been speed bumps and he always managed to navigate them with a smile. He has dedicated his life to his family. Not many people can honestly say, as I can, that they have NO bad memories of their father. My mission is to make his remaining days happy and pleasant. I OWE him that, and repay that debt with pleasure and joy.

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