

The story of a father and his sons

Gayle Nichol - October 2020

I have attended dozens of kids' hockey games in my life. Cheered on pint-sized baseball players and wobbly figure skaters. I have attended countless music recitals and thespian performances, dance competitions and SOCCER GAMES.

But never have I been more proud of other people's children than I am of my parents' two sons.

My dad's descent and decline into the chaos and confusion of Alzheimer's disease began years ago, but this last year has brought us to our collective knees in our attempts to meet dad's ever increasing needs while working all his cognitive muscles to hold on to the little reality that remains for him. Some days his world is filled with strangers who have loved him always. Sometimes he recognizes us and works to triangulate where we are in his memory of our lives, stretching to place us far closer to retirement than high school graduation.

But through the many challenges of the past year, I find myself standing back in awe of my two brothers. Both in their 50s on either side of me in the birth order, they have both come forward to wrangle dad with the quiet confidence of the fathers they are, and the good old boy sense of humour they grew up sharing with our father.

While he has become more frail and less physically and mentally grounded, they have not wavered in their unspoken decision to preserve dad's dignity. They treat him like a man.

With all the additional effort his age and ability require, my younger brother has continued to ensure dad gets out fishing at least once every year.

While he worked quickly around their house putting on a fresh coat of paint to brighten up their digs, my older brother put a brush in dad's hand and set him to work on a spot that could be easily touched up afterward.

They stand at the ready and allow dad to fold down his own walker and tremulously load it into the trunk. They take him out for lunch and patiently chat while dad struggles with silverware and muddling through a menu. They walk with him through Costco, picking up trunk loads of whatever treats strike his fancy in the moment, carefully steering him through the crowds. They visit the men's room with him to help with nature's call. They share boisterous boy jokes with him, they walk him through financial discussions, they assure him confidently when he is anxious or afraid — the same way he did for them decades ago, when they were his little boys.

They don't patronize him. They tell him the truth — as much truth as he can tolerate for the day.

My younger brother -- my dad's namesake -- has become my dad's pillar of strength. Dad looks to his baby boy's confident presence to make him feel secure. I've seen it.

My older brother has danced around on the periphery of dad's memory since early in his Alzheimer's diagnosis. But I have witnessed dad move from lashing out in anger when he was unsure what was going on, to calm after being assured by his older boy that the situation was secure and all is well.

I am blessed to have heard my dad say on many occasions that his greatest accomplishment in this life is his children. I have watched in awe at the gentle, respectful care his sons have shown him. And I believe dad is correct. These two men — dad's boys -- are a job well done.

