

# Chicago Tribune

Opinion Commentary

## David McGrath: My best Christmas gift



Author David McGrath's granddaughter Summer Allen, circa 2024. (David McGrath)

By **David McGrath**

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I was awakened from a deep sleep by the sound of a voice. It was 3 a.m.

Nothing good usually happens at that time of the night, as even F. Scott Fitzgerald opined when he wrote, "In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning."

But the voice calling out "Mimi!" and then "Grampy!" was that of my 9-year-old

granddaughter, Summer, who was staying with us overnight.

She probably wanted a glass of water or was maybe overhyped, as a lot of children are the closer it gets to Christmas. I turned on a light, grabbed a robe and rushed to her room. I found her sitting up in bed, blue eyes not quite teary but full of worry.

In our household, my wife is her go-to person, but Marianne — whom she calls “Mimi” — is not as light a sleeper as I am.

Summer managed a brave smile, making me feel loved, even though I was the backup adult.

“I’m afraid, Grampy.”

“Did you have a bad dream?” “It’s too dark.”

A night-light cast a soft glow in the bedroom. I stood and turned on the bathroom light and left the door partly open.

“Is that better?” She nodded but continued sitting up.

“Grampy?”

“What, honey?”

“Can I have a hug?”

Since infancy, she has stayed with us almost every Saturday night. Nine years’ accumulation of toys line the walls in two rooms, from the miniature kitchen set to stacks of stuffed animals.

Summer is our only grandchild, and before her birth, I had absolutely no idea what a difference she’d make in our lives. I had been sufficiently happy with my loving and inquisitive wife who reads a hundred books a year and my grown children who still seem to

enjoy visiting us But this new love came with bonus amazements, from Summer's rapidly expanding vocabulary — "Focus on the horn, Grampy," she told me at age 3 when I incorrectly called her stuffed unicorn a horse — to her surprising questions — "Do you think Grandma Dunne would have loved me?" referring to Marianne's mother whom Summer knew only from the photograph she studies on our wall.

I thought that after 450 weekends spent with her, our love and awe would naturally wane. I was stupefyingly wrong. It grows and grows.

But now that she's in fourth grade, and music, dance and piano lessons; Taylor Swift; swimming; and "Wicked," the film and merchandise, are high on the list of her favorite things, it is inevitable that Mimi and I, more wrinkled, more sedate and more familiar, would slip lower on the list, if not to the bottom.

Her impatience that morning was telling.

She wanted to play dodgeball on the front lawn or hockey with the tennis ball on the driveway or lacrosse — any one of the things she does outdoors with me. But I asked her to wait 15 more minutes since I was working on the laptop to finish a Christmas story.

She huffed, sat on the floor at my feet and started doing some sort of yoga exercise. She stopped after a minute.

"Grampy, are you finished?"

"No."

"What is the story?"

I told her it's about something that happened before she was born when I was a high school teacher and how my students gave me the best Christmas gift ever, though it was not a toy or anything you could put in a box. Instead, it was ...

"The end!" Summer said.

“What?”

“Too long, Grampy. And boring. May I have the computer?”

I was amused, and I complied. Her mother is an English teacher and her father an actor and a writer, so Summer is at ease with a keyboard.

After a few minutes, she handed the laptop back to me, saying she had written an ending, so could we please go outside?

I read the paragraph she typed to finish my story. She had commandeered two of the characters and involved them in something poop-related, which is pretty typical of a fourth grader, or of an Adam Sandler movie.

And then this: “He-heh says SUMMER ALLEN in her mom’s Belly. He-heh. I can’t (sic) wait to meet my grandfather.”

“What’s the matter, Grampy?”

“Nothing.” Nothing at all. “Let’s get the hockey sticks.”

We got our gear and headed out the door. But I knew that when we were through playing, I’d have to make a correction to the essay I was working on about the best Christmas gift I had ever received.

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