

David McGrath: Mom was more of a dive bomber than a helicopter parent

By David McGrath

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Gertrude and Charlie McGrath, back center, stand with their eight children and a few others at a relative's wedding, circa 1959. Author David McGrath is in a black bow tie in the foreground, second from right. (Family photo)

For once, I felt like the “big man on campus.”

I had just received a letter in the mail saying I had made the dean's list. That evening, I learned from my brother's girlfriend, Michelle, that her best friend — older, attractive and worldly — wanted to date me.

In less than a month, I would turn 19. And I recently switched from Lucky Strikes to Marlboros, the real man's brand of cigarette. Not only that, but since the start of summer, I had been pumping iron three times a week with my pal Tom Booth in his basement. After each workout, with arms and shoulders aching and biceps bulging, we would promenade down the main aisle at the Evergreen Park Plaza in our muscle shirts.

I connected with Michelle's friend on the phone on a Friday afternoon while I was alone in the house with my parents at work and my siblings at school. I was feeling her out while trying to impress her with the right amount of bravado when my monologue was abruptly interrupted by a clicking sound, followed by an unfamiliar voice:

"This is the operator with an emergency breakthrough request on this line." I was totally befuddled — until I heard my mother's voice.

"I've been trying to call for an hour, David, and you're tying up the phone. Make sure you're home when I get there."

The line went dead. And so did my inflated ego, as I wondered how much of my mother's scolding my potential love interest had heard.

Mom's busting into my romantic conversation was embarrassing but not that much of a surprise. For I had learned long ago that nothing would stop her from doing what she thought best for her home and family.

Like the time I saw her morph into beast mode to pry a leech out of my little sister Nancy's leg as a small crowd at a swimming lake in Michigan gathered to watch.

Or how, when I was little, she would commandeer five bench seats on a CTA bus for her and her brood for the hourlong commute to Rainbow Beach on 79th Street on broiling days in August with no air conditioning at home.

Or when she stepped outside on a frigid day in December, wearing an apron but no coat, to issue a stern warning to some older boys who were vandalizing our snow fort and posturing for a fight.

Not that our mother was one of those "helicopter parents," hovering over us in an unhealthy way. She would never dream, for example, of interfering at school, implicitly trusting the nuns to administer education and "justice." As fiercely as she loved us, she resisted the maternal urge to overprotect, intellectually aware that accountability and independence would help us in the long run.

Which is why at the height of the 96th Place scandal of 1962, when my older brother and his friends were caught in an infamous act of Halloween mischief involving a freezer, a dog, a brown paper bag and a Zippo lighter, it was good old Mom who convened a block meeting to address the matter. Not to ensure special treatment for her own but to make certain all the perpetrators were equally punished and rehabilitated.

It all makes sense when you consider what a mother raised through war and the Depression was up against.

Shortly after Gertrude Rose Cichoszewski married Charlie McGrath in 1941, she got a crash course in self-reliance when my father was drafted into the Army for service in World War II.

After my father was assigned to an artillery command post in the Panama Canal Zone, she had her first child, Charlie Jr., in a Chicago hospital. For the

next 18 months, my mother had to care for him alone. A story she often told was that when her husband came back to the States on furlough, the toddler said, "Go away, man," when my father tried to enter the bedroom.

When my mother became pregnant again, she wrote to President Harry Truman to ask if he could please speed things up so that her husband would not miss the birth of his second child. The White House replied with a polite form letter. Not long after, James was born, my father still absent.

Truman did finally speed things up, dropping bombs, accepting the Japanese surrender and sending Capt. McGrath by ship and rail to the train station on Chicago's South Side.

Mom was never happier.

Still, it didn't get much easier, as she had to raise a family that grew to 10 on the erratic commission my father earned as a tile salesperson. Not to mention, it was an era when women's employment, education and political avenues were closed off or restricted. They couldn't sign contracts for loans or even own a credit card. Nor did Mom ever drive.

Yet Gertrude McGrath succeeded as a mother in spite of gender restrictions, and as a role model and leader ahead of her time, thanks to her strength, ingenuity and tough love.

And her hijacking of my phone conversation that day? A blessing in disguise, ultimately rerouting me to find Marianne, my future wife.

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