

NAPERVILLE SUN NAPERVILLE SUN OPINION

David McGrath: Who says father knows best? Mom was always one step ahead of me, and always right



David McGrath's mother, Gertrude, seen here with his father Charles and his brother Charles Jr., had an innate way of always knowing what was right, much to David's chagrin. (Family photo)



By **DAVID MCGRATH**

PUBLISHED: May 8, 2025 at 5:45 PM CDT

There seemed to be no end to the embarrassment my mother caused me as a kid.

We grew up watching Marlon Brando and James Dean at the movies when motorcycle caps and tight jeans were ultra cool. So what did Mom get for me and each of my five brothers for Christmas? Corduroy pants in “husky” sizes that had cuffs and were so baggy they made a whipping sound that announced every humiliating stride as I walked down the school hallway.

Granted, your legs didn't freeze like they did in jeans in Chicago's winters, and they were soft and comfortable enough for sitting at your desk all day. But I'm convinced the other kids were stifling their laughter the entire year.

In sixth grade, I was mortified when Mom made me give Sister Joel a bottle of Jergens lotion for Christmas. I protested that it was a dumb present for a nun to whom the other kids gave rosaries and candles and framed pictures of the Blessed Virgin. Sister, in fact, looked like she was going to cry when I gave it to her, and then squeezed my hand, probably because she was also ashamed.

Which reminds me of the time I was 9 and standing up at my Uncle Don's wedding with Cathy Gogal, the bride's sister, and the prettiest girl I ever saw. I wore a white tuxedo with a cummerbund, which I had to admit looked cute

But leave it to Mom to ruin everything when she made me put a bag of Tootsie Rolls in my pocket with which to feed Kevin if he got antsy in church, which I told her would be disgraceful to do in the middle of holy Mass and in front of Cathy.

Lucky for Mom, though. When Kevin started squirming during Communion, the candy shut him up. And Cathy signaled me with a hopeful smile that she would like a Tootsie Roll too.

The worst was the Southeast Improvement Association's annual variety show. Mom was the director and said I could sing, "Que Sera, Sera," the only song I knew all the words to since they played it on the radio a million times a day. The night of the show, however, she made me put on a yellow wig since it was Doris Day's song. She said Red Skelton and Milton Berle wore wigs all the time and it was fun. But I hated it to death.

Then a funny thing happened. The audience cheered and clapped and kept standing till I sang it again. I was the hit of the show, and people kept buying me bottles of Pepsi and chocolate Dixie Cups until my belly ached.

It gave me a liking for the stage, and confidence in front of an audience, which came in handy when I joined the high school debate team.

And later as a musician when I was in college.

And a school teacher after graduation.

Which seems to be true about mothers everywhere, who magically know things ahead of time and things you don't even say out loud but are in your head.

They know when you're sick before you do. Or if you're just faking it to stay home on test day.

Don't try to sneak past them and hide your sadness or fear or worry, since they narrow their eyes and can see inside you. I think you know what I mean. And they'll always get you to tell them what's wrong.

Mothers are all-knowing that way, mainly because they are so loving; and they're the closest thing we have to people's conception of an all-knowing, all-loving God.

Some may think it blasphemous to make such a comparison.

But honestly, with respect to mothers, I think God would be flattered.

David McGrath is an emeritus English professor at the College of DuPage and author of "Far Enough Away," a collection of Chicagoland stories. Email him at mcgrathd@dupage.edu.
