

# David McGrath: My father left me a road map for life's journey



Author David McGrath's father, Charlie, poses with David and sister Rosie in 1951 at their home on Chicago's South Side. (Gertrude McGrath)



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I didn't quite get what the fathers were up to. Dad kept us in the dark, calling it a midnight swim.

It was the summer of 1960, and Charlie McGrath Sr. had rented a resort cabin on Lake Morrison in Michigan for our family of 10. Staying in the other rentals were five other families from the same neighborhood in Evergreen Park.

Between the McGraths, DiBennardis and Grandes who lived on 96th Place, and the Booths, Burges and Dugals on the adjacent block of 97th Street, it felt like a traveling circus with a dozen adults and twice as many children.

And every evening when it grew dark, all the fathers and mothers took their towels and robes down to the beach.

It was actually closer to 9 p.m., not midnight. Eleven years old, I wondered why they'd want to swim at night when it was chilly, and the mosquitoes were out, and you couldn't play dive-and-catch since how could you see the ball? And it would take forever to get used to the water.

Years earlier, when we first moved to Evergreen Park, and the families on our block had begun picnicking and partying together, the fathers smoking and drinking beer on each other's porches in the evening, I'd fall asleep to the steady thrum of men's voices through my bedroom screen.

On Sundays, the fathers drove everyone to Mass at St. Bernadette's, where we also attended school, and I thought this was how the world worked, with a rule that your playmates' parents must be friends of your own parents.

Later, I learned that the fathers had served during World War II, which somehow meant that although three were tall, and one was almost bald, and two had trades, and four wore suits and ties to work, all were brothers.

I didn't fully understand why, knowing only that the fathers contended with the world's mysteries and machinations, so that we did not have to, blissful about our futures stretching to infinity with limitless opportunities for fun, especially when the dads started vacationing together.

Which meant that Tom and John Booth — the boys with whom my brother Kenneth and I walked home from school each day, rode bikes together to buy comic books at Baker's grocery, played baseball on Saturdays and went trick-or-treating on Halloween — would be at the same resort for a whole week of what amounted to summer camp without the homesickness. When every dinner was a cookout with hot dogs and shoestring potato chips, and hours of swimming, chicken fights, sunburn, trolling for bass with a popping bug behind the rowboat and exploring the surrounding woods.

August's daylight lingered past supper, when everybody would meet up at our cottage with its extra large family room with two picnic tables pushed together under a high timber ceiling.

When the grownups gathered at the door to leave, my father turned to remind us to stay inside and behave. The other fathers nodded solemnly, as Tom and I choked back laughs since Dad was wearing olive green rubber goggles and holding a cold can of beer against his bare chest.

We waited till the grownups cleared out before commencing an indoor “carnival” where everyone could choose which group to join for Monopoly or Clue or Sorry or charades and raiding the pantry and fridge for Jays Potato Chips and Pepsi and Salerno Butter Cookies.

My older brother, no surprise, chose Monopoly when he saw that pretty Phyllis Grande was part of the group. And Tom was razzing and poking me toward the corner where Lynn DiBennardi, in the same grade, was dealing cards for Clue — her dazzling smile made it hard for me to breathe.

And there’s a bright clarity with which I remember the wide eyes of others around the table, since, unsupervised, we were oddly cautious and extra kind and also eager to follow the fathers’ orders to behave, so as not to break the delicious tension simmering in that room.

When my sister Rosie held up her hand for everyone to hush, we could hear a man’s voice outside sing the words, “Michael rowed the boat ashore,” followed by a crescendo of laughter and a single, un-adult-like squeal.

And when one of the boys who had been playing charades suggested that must be the only verse the aging father could remember, we laughed and went back to our games and covert passions, so that another squeal from outside of “Wheeee, Michael!” and the muffled roar that followed, elicited no more of our attention.

I don’t know what time they came back; just that all the grownups had wet and stringy hair, and I was tired and glad for bed, though I didn’t fall fast asleep. The window was open, the breeze pushing the scent of water and sand and seaweed. And I was impatient for tomorrow, so I shut my eyes tight, though unable to shake some telltale sadness for life having passed our elders by, despite that for the rest of the week and sometimes right in the middle of the day, Mr. Booth would stand on his cabin’s porch and call out across the volleyball court and horseshoe pits, “Whee ... Michael!” and my father would smile and wave.

When the secret revealed itself as we got older, I looked back with admiration and amusement at their daring.

I was also grateful because the fathers had equipped us with a road map for life's journey with structure and boundaries, but also escape routes and freedom to find our own way.

While others not as fortunate have searched in anguish all their lives, I became a whole person with direction, as a part of the community, a part of humanity.

Thanks to the fathers.

Thanks to my dad.

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