

On failure and fatherhood

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By BECKY ANDREWS

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My dad is a failure. Sounds harsh, I know. Hear me out though. Dad's not from the south. He grew up the first child of, Elena Romano. When Elena entered the United States via ship from Italy she was just 2 years old. Shortly after her family arrived her father and mother split up and soon all four of their children, including Elena, were placed in separate orphanages. Keep in mind this was a different time.

Before women could vote, before almost everyone had an automobile, and before many laws and regulations were placed upon state run facilities. Growing up in an orphanage during that time was, according to Elena, like living in purgatory.

Needless to say, she was unprepared to enter the 'real world' when the orphanage could no longer care for her. To make a long story short, she married the first of two not so great suitors. The first left when my dad was 2 and his little sister, Marguerite, was a tiny baby. Scared and alone with two small children and an 8th grade education, Elena soon fell under the spell of another man who was even worse than the first.

Leo had a horrible temper and didn't like my dad. He felt this two year old boy was competition. His horrible drinking problem may have had something to do with such a distorted view of his stepson.

When Leo was gone for days on a drinking binge leaving his wife, two step children and one biological daughter with no food to eat, my dad would break into a local bakery to steal day old bread and pastry.

While Leo was gone, Elena and the children would live on stolen breads and hot tea. My Aunt Margie told me of the times my dad would knock on a window to see if he could come inside. If

his stepfather was at home, Margie would have to give my dad a nod that let him know the cold streets of Pittsburg would be his bed for the night.

The last time my dad saw him, Leo had come home smelling of stale beer and cigarettes. Wielding a switch blade and staggering, Leo looked at my dad and said to his wife, 'I'm gonna cut his throat! He's a bum! He'll always be a bum!' The next day Elena took her two youngest children and fled. Leaving behind a horrible man, worse memories and her 12 year old son. Just a few weeks later, dad was placed in a foster home in upstate Pennsylvania. This new family was nothing like he had ever known.

This new mom and dad were kind. His foster mom would hug him and encourage him to make good choices. His foster dad didn't yell and scream but he was firm and expected this boy of the streets to mind and follow rules. He even had the bright idea of getting my dad involved in sports to help redirect hostility.

By the time dad was ready to graduate from high school, he was a sports legend and had a football scholarship waiting at Western Carolina College. During his sophomore year he met my mom. They married and had 6 healthy children.

And here we are decades later. Dad still talks about how much better our life would have been if he would have made better financial or spiritual decisions. He's retired now so he has more time to stew over mistakes. We don't feel the same. You see his children, all six of us, think he did a good job.

We're good parents, all of us have a good sense of humor (you have to in this family), we're all stable (more or less), and call each other: best friend. He was a failure alright. A failure at becoming a victim of circumstance, but a success at being dad.

Comments?