

I Remember “Mama”

My mother, lovingly called *Mama* by the children in our family, often takes pen to paper in order to express her feelings, to advocate for the helpless, to instill hope, and to challenge my six brothers and me to put our faith and compassion into action.

I, on the other hand, am putting my fingers to the keyboard of my laptop. Every day, I am determined to remember Mama’s incredible spirit of giving. I strive to let her example guide me on this journey we call life. When people find a quality in me that remind them of Mama, I am honored. At the same time, I am challenged to live my life with the same grace, gusto, and dedication she embraces.



Not a holiday or family gathering passes by that does not include echoing in the room from young and old, accompanied by smiles and laughter. Do you remember when Mama...? I often feel that God gave our Ma/Mama an extra dose of love. And, every time I hear someone say, *“I Remember Mama,”* I feel God is telling me and all in the room to stop and listen because someone truly great is in your presence.

Growing up Mama would remind my brothers and me that the greatest gift we could give her was to love each other. We were encouraged to avoid making rash judgments that are fixed and unchangeable, and to see the other sibling’s point of view. I often tell those I serve that I feel the greatest virtue is the gift of empathy because when you walk in someone else’s shoes you are guided to make wiser choices. This belief, no doubt, was instilled by our mother. I am happy to say her wish came true because my best friends in life are my brothers, and there is nothing I wouldn’t do for them. I suffer with them when they struggle and experience disappointments. I rejoice with them when they succeed. I love them with all my heart. And I am confident that sentiment is reciprocated.

Although, we certainly had a great role model in Mama, I don’t want you to think we grew up with wings, singing gospel tunes from the cradle. Mama surely had her struggles with a gang of six boys and one tomboyish girl. We all had our challenging moments.

While I am reminded often by Mama that she hoped for a daughter to join the gang, my brothers remind me that with each pregnancy they huddled together, channeling testosterone in the air, with the hope that Mama didn’t need the frilly bonnet she tucked away in her suitcase en route to the hospital. Thank goodness, my brothers’ appeal to the powers of the universe was misdirected. The rest is history. As you may have guessed, Mama named me Mary after Christ’s mother—the one she honors every day; the role model for her every decision. Me—I prayed for a sister to be my sidekick, but to no avail. With my older brothers cheering and parading around my bed, I was gleefully informed post delivery that my younger siblings arrived with the Y chromosome. Between you and me—I am grateful for those unanswered prayers!

It took some time for me to “grow on” my big brothers. I was a regular at the hospital Emergency Room ...“ER report states sister gets hit with pliers because she didn’t duck quickly enough when brothers were tossing it to open newspaper wire and getting ready for daily delivery...ER report notes sister’s arms didn’t move quickly enough when she was recruited to become their human wheelbarrow...ER report mentions sister didn’t jump fast enough when golf club swing was in full motion.” Needless to say, the gift of athleticism “sorta” passed me by. I have the scars to confirm that fact.

My younger brothers and I loved being entertained with stories about our older siblings Dan and Ray. One story involved my brother sticking my Grandma’s cherished cat in the freezer to cool him off on a steamy summer day. The only saving grace was the furry friend’s tail sticking outside the freezer door, just in time for Grandma to intervene.

And we all remember the day when my brother Patrick casually mentioned he was tired and needed to lay for a bit on the field after a neighborhood football game. Hours later, we found him unable to move because he fractured his neck and didn’t want anyone to know.

I stand in awe of Mama, who dealt with crisis after crisis with remarkable resolve and unmatched devotion. My two younger brothers, Mick and Kevin, are guiding us from heaven. Mick died at seven months of age after suffering from a case of pneumonia (later linked to a complication of cystic fibrosis). Mama tearfully told us how heartbreaking it was to be asked to leave the hospital at the end of the day, as Mick’s hospitalization took place during a time in history when families were not allowed to stay with loved ones overnight. How wonderful that is no longer the case. Mick died without Mama’s arms around him that night, but he lives close to her heart each and every day.

My youngest brother Kevin also died from complications of cystic fibrosis at the age of 20, but only after receiving Mama's unwavering example of love and dedication. Kevin's exemplary life was so admired by the doctors and nurses at the University of Chicago that when he gave his last breath, they were all beside him; kneeling at his bedside. Despite countless hospitalizations, Mama never once left Kevin's side.

My brother Patrick is always right there beside Mama in her time of need. He is our "go to" guy; a hero to all of us, including his wife and four daughters (ahh....payback dear brother--I channeled estrogen and XX chromosomes each time I found out my sister-in-law was pregnant—). My older brother, Ray, developed Stevens-Johnson's disease and went into a coma after he was mistakenly given a dose of penicillin he was allergic to while in hospital when he was a toddler. Today, he marvels all of us with his strength and acceptance of challenges that come his way without complaint. He always sees the rainbow and never the storm. Jay, who was known for fishing with a stick at his wishing lake (the neighborhood mud puddle), is the most generous of all. He is the brother who loves and gives to anyone who asks...often to strangers in need. He got this trait from Mama. Dan, the eldest, has dedicated his entire life advocating for those in need and taking over as the leader of the band when my Dad passed away. He always has our backs—all of us! He was a born leader. Dan has been my "saving grace" on more than one occasion. He inspires and uplifts all of us.

My Dad died with a twinkle in his Irish eyes, starting off his last day on earth telling me he wanted to be clean shaven as he was getting ready for his "girlfriend" to walk in the door (Mom was returning from a medical visit at Mayo Clinic with my aunt). It was an incredible gift for my brothers and me to grow up knowing my Dad cherished our mother in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, and through all the ups and downs. What a gift it is to know your dad is madly in love with your mother.

I often ask myself how Mama does it. Life has not been easy for her. In fact, it has been a roller coaster of challenges, heartaches, and struggles. But for Mama these are all pathways that lead to faith, hope, and love. I see Mama's face when I welcome a single refugee mother with children at her side because her husband is missing or was killed in a war torn country they left. I think of Mama when I see hope in that mother's eyes and the strength in her walk. I remember Mama in that long Minnesota winter that just won't quit. I hear her voice telling me that everyday gives us opportunities to see the beauty, not just in the sun, but in the snowstorm. I look up to Mama when my faith is tested and my hope falters. Listening to her stories reminds me that all things are possible with God.

I guess I may have answered my own question. Mama carries on gracefully because she believes each day is an opportunity to serve. In that same vein, I am called to serve as a Refugee Resettlement Director and grateful that I work for Catholic Charities. Their mission reminds me of Mama's-- to see the promise of the rainbow at the end of the storm and recognize

the colors of hope in that post storm rainbow. I am expected to bring the love of God to people of all ages, genders, ethnic backgrounds, and faith traditions. It is my responsibility to provide help and create hope for those in need, regardless of whether the sun is shining or the storm clouds are rolling.

On the days when it is difficult to see that rainbow, I close my eyes and I remember Mama.

I can only hope that people will continue to see glimpses of Mama in me, just as they do in my brothers. When Mama walked through the door this St. Paddy's Day wearing shamrock antennas, all the grandchildren and great grandchildren ran to her side with their smart phones ready to capture precious moments. They wanted to remember Mama playing charades imitating a pirate walking the plank or a monkey at the zoo. At these family gatherings I hear voices echoing, "Do you remember when Mama..." It is on those occasions that I feel God's tap on my shoulder reminding me to stop and listen... because someone truly great is in my presence.

Submitted by:

Mary Alessio—Director of Advancement

**This article was originally published in 2014. I was honored to accept the Director of Advancement position that year. My brother Ray continued to embrace an example of strength under pressure when he was diagnosed with cancer in 2017. He taught all of us, not only how to live with grace, but how to die with grace. His life was one of perseverance and hope. We all strive to emulate his goodness.

