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Essential articles on parenting and education

Raising Activist Children

by **Connie Schultz, journalist and author**

My mother always warned us girls, “Don’t marry him 'til you see how he treats the waitress.”

Her advice came from living a life as one of those people whom strangers are allowed to mistreat. Janey had wanted to be a nurse but couldn’t afford to go to college, so she was a stay-at-home mother until she went to work as a nurse’s aide when I was in high school. She worked to augment my father’s union wages at the electric plant so that they could send me, their firstborn, to college.

For years, she worked on the mental health unit of the local hospital, and she’d wear sweaters in the dead of summer to cover up the bruises on her arms that were part of the job. In the last years of her life, she was a hospice homecare provider, and the joke about my mother was that people lived longer when Janey showed up.

She worked every other Christmas and Thanksgiving, and she never made more than \$8.25 an hour for the kind of labor she vowed her children would never have to do.

My mother was never bitter. Instead, her daily experiences made her an ardent activist for kindness. She believed that how we treated someone we were allowed to mistreat was the measure of who we were. She expected her four children to know the last names of every store clerk, cafeteria worker and janitor who crossed our paths on a regular basis in our small town, and we were not allowed to call them by their first names no matter what the tags on their chests said. Everyone, she said, deserved a title, and so they were “Mr.” and “Mrs.,” and “Miss,” and, by the 1970s, even “Ms.,” although she never understood why a woman would want to hide that she was married, even when it was her own daughter.

We said thank you for the change returned from a purchase and for every door held open by a stranger. We were expected to remember that, no matter what someone did for a living, it mattered. Most people, she said,

dragged themselves out of bed every day to work hard and play by the rules, and they deserved our respect.

My mother never held political office, never had a fancy title, unless you count the time she was president of the ladies circle at our church. The only time I remember her picture being in the paper is when she won a weight loss contest at the beauty shop. But what she did for others became clear at her wake after she died too young at 62. More than 800 people showed up, and one of my friends, who is rather short, joked that when he finally made his way to the funeral parlor's porch he half expected to see a sign reading, "You must be this tall to enter."

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"I've never seen anything like this," he told me that night. "Standing in line, I've heard so many stories about your mother, from the tailor who used to hem her pants to the woman who sold her olive loaf at the corner grocery. I feel like I really missed knowing a remarkable human being."

My mother would have scoffed at the notion that she was an activist about anything, but her lessons for her children ran deep. They are why one of my sisters, who has a masters degree, teaches middle school in an inner city neighborhood, and why another is a nurse and never misses a friend's birthday or anniversary.

So often, I hear my mother's voice egging me on when I write my newspaper column about workers who still play by the rules and work hard but have no healthcare or a living wage. I feel her hand gently resting on my back every time I strike up a conversation with a waitress, and I could imagine her smile the first time my daughter called from college and started talking about the cafeteria workers by name.

Looking back now on my mother's brand of parenting, I can't ever remember a time when she sat us down and said, "I want you to be activists." Instead, she just went about her life, often making it more difficult for herself because she refused to give in to fatigue or life's daily irritations and take out her frustrations on innocent others. Patience takes more time, but she always mustered it. Not for us kids, mind you, but there's only so much you can ask of a mother of four. And we were a rambunctious four.

In time, my mother's brand of activism bore fruit through her children. Because of my parents' hard work, we had opportunities they never knew for themselves, and my mother's activism expanded through the work of her children to embrace a larger world.

I often tell the story of my mother because parents engage in a lot of hand-wringing over how to raise children who will care about the world. Family life is complicated and stressed in ways my parents never knew. Too often, the more educated the parents, the more stressed their children tend to be. It does seem at times that the parental eyes are focused, not on the child in front of them, but on the next tier of accomplishment.

While formal education and extracurricular instruction matter a great

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deal, it also matters that we raise children with big hearts. The best way to do this is to model a life of compassion and engagement. This takes time and effort, but the good news is that everyone, including the parent, benefits. Standing tall for something bigger than ourselves breeds an expectation that we will

serve, and girds the spine for whatever life brings us.

Last year, my husband, Sherrod Brown, ran a successful race in Ohio for the United States Senate. I took a leave of absence from my job as a columnist to volunteer full-time for his campaign, and I would never have made it to the end with my sanity intact if I hadn't had a young woman named Wendy Leatherberry by my side. At 31, Wendy was already a seasoned activist, and I have her parents to thank for that.

Wendy was raised to save the world. She is the only child of Bill Leatherberry and Diane Phillips-Leatherberry. Nothing was left to chance when it came to raising a daughter who would want to leave her mark on the world. They named her childhood cat Sam, for example, after Sam Ervin of Watergate fame.

When Wendy was six, her parents took her along for the two-and-a-half hour drive to Columbus to watch the swearing-in ceremonies for Ohio's new governor. She was in second grade at the time, and was supposed to write a report about her experience as the trade-off for missing

school. As it turned out, though, the teachers in her school district ended up being on strike that week.

Not to worry. The next day, her mother took her to the picket line so that Wendy could give her report in person.

In 1986, writer Jimmy Breslin interviewed 11-year-old Wendy after a confluence of circumstances alerted him to her desire to be president of the United States. When he asked her what her first act as president would be, the little squirt didn't hesitate. She told him she would withdraw William Rehnquist's nomination to be Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

In seventh grade, she was already donating babysitting money to a presidential campaign, insisting that her parents allow her to buy a money order so that Joe Biden would know the money came directly from her. When she was a freshman in college on a visit home to celebrate Passover, her mother insisted they have dinner at a shopping center in the black community where someone had recently been shot. The point of this impromptu excursion was to prove that white people weren't afraid.

By the time I met Wendy, she had already held significant roles in several campaigns, and was the youngest member and only woman on a suburban school board. She was also board president, and I bragged about her constantly in speeches, especially when the room was full of women. There's nothing quite like a room full of female activists beaming at the sight of one of their own.

Not once during our long, exhausting campaign did I ever hear Wendy complain about the work she was doing. She had a full-time job and used up all her accumulated vacation time so that she could always be with me when I traveled separately from Sherrod. Repeatedly, she reminded me that her volunteer work was a privilege, and that she would never forget this opportunity to change the direction of our country. Her humility and dedication went a long way to keeping my own attitude in check.

That's the power of a parent's activism.

I'll leave you with a story by the writer and activist Grace Paley, who left us behind earlier this year. Paley had a lot to say about war, race and women, among other things, and I first discovered her short stories when I was a teenager with boney knees and no idea how to make sense of the world. She was a Jewish New Yorker. I was a white-bread Protestant in small-town America.

But the women in her stories – mostly Jewish, mostly working class – had a lot more in common with the women in my life than those mothers across the river who wouldn't let their children play with me. Paley taught me early that it was about economics, not race or geography, when it came to who was heard and who was silenced, who got to run the world and who let the world run them down.

After Paley died in August, I pulled out a collection of her essays titled *Just As I Thought*. In her essay, "Traveling," she first described her mother and her older sister traveling on a bus from New York to Virginia in 1927. It was an express bus, and so it stopped only in Philadelphia and Wilmington before it picked up passengers in Washington, D.C. At that stop, the black people who had boarded in New York or Philadelphia "rose from their seats, put their bags and boxes together, and moved to the back of the bus."

Paley's mother and sister, confronted for the first time with the practice of enforced racism, remained in their seats, which were near the back of the bus. When the bus driver sighed and told her that whites had to move to the front of the bus, Paley's mother said, quite simply, "No."

He asked her again.

And again, she said, "No."

For the third time, he told her she had to get out of her seat, and while Paley's sister trembled, her mother said, calmly and without expression, "No."

Fifteen years later, 20-year-old Grace Paley was on a bus from New York to Miami Beach, where her brand-new husband was training to go off to war. Miles and miles she rode, and somewhere in the South – she didn't remember exactly where – a black woman carrying a sleeping baby boarded the crowded bus. Paley was in the last "white row," and offered the mother her seat.

"She looked to the right and left as well as she could," wrote Paley. "Softly, she said, 'Oh no.' I became fully awake."

Paley then offered to hold her sleeping son. Fearful, but exhausted, the black woman placed her baby on Paley's lap. The child never woke from his slumber, molding himself to Paley's curves as she closed her eyes in blissful imaginings for her own future life.

She was jolted alert when a white man said, loud enough for everyone to hear, “Lady, I wouldn’t of touched that thing with a meat hook.”

But she was her mother’s daughter.

“I held that boy a little tighter, kissed his curly head, pressed him even closer so that he began to squirm. So sleepy, he reshaped himself inside my arms.”

The baby’s mother reached down and cupped her hand around his head, and the two women held their position until the bus pulled into the next station.

When Paley wrote her 1997 essay, she conjured up a fifty-year-old memory of that weary mother, that baby asleep in her arms. But the little face that turned toward her in her mind’s eye had become “the brown face of my own grandson, my daughter’s boy.”

Recounting that bus ride to her siblings, Grace added a postscript that only years of living and committed activism can provide:

“Then I told it to them: How it happened on just such a journey, when I was still quite young, that I first knew my grandson, first held him close, but could protect him for only about twenty minutes fifty years ago.”

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