

Because You Were There

By Stephen Rusiniak

From the 2010 book: **Chicken Soup for the Soul Thanks Mom**

There's a lot more to being a woman than being a mother, but there's a hell of a lot more to being a mother than most people suspect. ~Roseanne Barr

I shivered on the sidelines as my freshman high school soccer team played on. Snow began to fall as the playing conditions deteriorated. It was a close game so I knew there was little chance of my entering the action. Across the field I saw a few spectators—including my mom. How I longed to score a goal for her or for my coach to praise my athletic prowess in her presence, but instead, I never played—that day or many others. She was used to this. I wasn't much of a baseball player either. Thawing out in the car on the drive home and feeling guilty about her coming *'for nothing,'* I told her she shouldn't have bothered. She replied, "I had to." And, when I asked her why she simply said, "Because you were there." It'd be years before I'd realize the significance of her words, and all it took for this spontaneous epiphany to come to pass was for me to become a father.

With age comes wisdom, and now, after many years as a parent, I've come to recognize and appreciate many of the sacrifices that both my parents, but especially my mom, suffered for the sake of my siblings and me. To this end, and almost four decades later, I can easily identify with why my mom spent so many autumn afternoons braving the elements to stand on the sidelines during my none-too-stellar high school soccer career. I've also come to understand how her daily existence revolved around the lives and well-being of my brothers, sister and me, and how her adult wants and needs took a backseat to the wants and needs of her children. This was an invaluable example I'd come to follow when one day I'd become a father.

My *friends with kids* acted as if they possessed a *special knowledge* simply because they'd sired offspring. They felt compelled to offer their *knowing* opinion of how my life would forever change upon my entrance into the world of parenthood. Of course, I simply discarded their warnings; after all, no child could ever have that much influence over the life of an adult—or so I thought.

And then one morning, I became a father. With Michael's birth, as foretold, my life changed. His birth became the catalyst that sparked in me the need to become more keenly aware of all that was happening within my immediate world. Do the cars really travel too fast down our street? How good are the schools? His birth prompted me to focus more on the greater world too. What was happening in our country and around the world? And how would the totality of all I'd begun to notice impact the life of this precious child for whom I was now responsible? His life mattered more than mine and his wants and needs immediately surpassed my own. I found parenthood to be rewarding, fulfilling, a blessing and sometimes, a scary proposition. The world was a frightening place, and I quickly realized that I could only provide my son with a minimal amount of security, and for a limited amount of time. The birth of my daughter, Tracy, compounded all that I'd been feeling.

Eventually, I became more comfortable in my role as father, protector and provider. And, I also learned that, as my *friends with kids* had predicted, parenthood had forever changed me. My children came first, and to this end, I've gladly surrendered whatever I might've done for what I knew I had to do—echoes of my own childhood and of my moms' devotion. My willingness to participate in various facets of their lives sometimes surprised me too, whether it was taking time off to be a "class

mother” for the preschool pumpkin picking trip, crafting an edible castle complete with a moat filled with goldfish crackers for a Cub Scout bake-off, or corralling a herd of out-of-control hormone-raging middle schoolers while chaperoning an overnight class trip.

As time went by, I began to realize that long before I'd even become a father, my education in proactive and participating parenting had already begun—the result of the unconditional love, guidance and example set forever in stone by Mom. So many subtle and yet valuable lessons were being taught during my childhood.

My son was a four-year member of his high school lacrosse team. He'd played in almost every game—mostly as a starter, but during his last year his playing time evaporated. Still, I attended his games, celebrating when he had a few minutes of field time and commiserating with him when he didn't. Sometimes I wondered if he ever felt awkward about my attending, but if he did, he never mentioned it. Regardless, I simply had to be there. It was a dad thing, but it was taught to me a lifetime ago by my mom. I was always proud of him for his dedication to his team and to the game. Maybe one day he'll ask why I came to all of his games, his elementary school plays and field trips, his scouting events and every other thing that he ever did. If he does, I'll respond to his question with the same answer Mom once gave me, “I had to, because you were there.”



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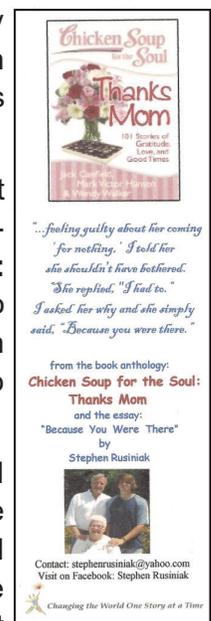
(Thanks Mom!)

the backstory:

Because you were there is a story about parental love—my mom's and my own. It's drawn from my memories of her words and actions from the days when I was a not very gifted high school athlete, and later on, as a parent myself, witnessing my son Michael's unwavering commitment to his high school lacrosse team—even as his status as a starter was beginning to fade.

Although accepted by a local parenting magazine for publication, I asked that this piece be returned prior to publication after learning that Chicken Soup had selected it for inclusion in their then upcoming book, **Chicken Soup for the Soul: Thanks Mom**. Although it could have appeared in both, the magazine editor—who had previously published several of my pieces, graciously returned my submission as requested. You see, I had an idea of just how I wanted the "star of the story" to find out about what I'd written.

The morning after I'd received my promotional editions of the book, I prepared a surprise for Mom. I had a signed copy of the book, commemorative bookmarks for her friends, a basket of flowers and a thank you card (for all she'd done for me over the years) delivered to the information desk at the hospital where she volunteered. And then I waited, for hours, for her reaction. Finally, later that afternoon, she called. She told me that she hadn't read the story yet because "the



book is somewhere on the 4th floor.” She added, “Everyone else throughout the hospital has been reading *my* story (I loved the *MY* story) and some of the others from the book.” She promised to read the one I’d written when she went home that night. Eventually, several hours later, Mom called. She’d read her story. She said ‘it was nice.’ A rave review from my mom. I was thrilled!



I surprised her again a few months later when the story appeared in the popular magazine, **Woman's World**. I framed a copy of the magazine cover and *her* story which she promptly displayed on her wall.

Mom passed away the following year. Among the mementos we placed with her before we said goodbye was *her* copy of the book containing *her* story. It seemed appropriate.

In addition to being published in the book anthology, **Chicken Soup for the Soul: Thanks Mom** and in **Woman's World**, *Because you were there* went on to appear on many inspirational websites and parenting blogs around the world. Mom's words and actions would eventually reach millions. She would have been surprised, and proud, and humbled—all at the same time by such a response.

Me too.

the photos:

The first photo is Mom, taken two months before she passed away, at a family luau at my brother Paul's.

The second photo is of the bookmark made specifically for the promotional giveaway copies of the book.

The third photo is Mom, my son, Michael and me and is one of several taken specifically for the bookmark. We told Mom that we were taking photos for something else—specifically for what, I don't recall now, but I do remember that she was surprised later when she saw it (or so she said later on!)