

Out there on the beam

By Stephen Rusiniak

"I still worry about her, after all, no matter her age, I will always be her daddy."

She didn't make a sound. "You have a daughter," the doctor said before whispering something to the nurses. His eyes silently spoke volumes as the O.R. team quickly went to work. Not even a minute old and already I felt such love for her, as I stood there, absolutely powerless to help my baby girl. 'But I'm her daddy, I'm supposed to protect her, to keep her safe,' I thought, and still, all I could do was watch from the sidelines; and do nothing.

It was out of my hands.

She came home five days later, and for a while, I kept her safe, for as long as I could, until the time came when I couldn't.

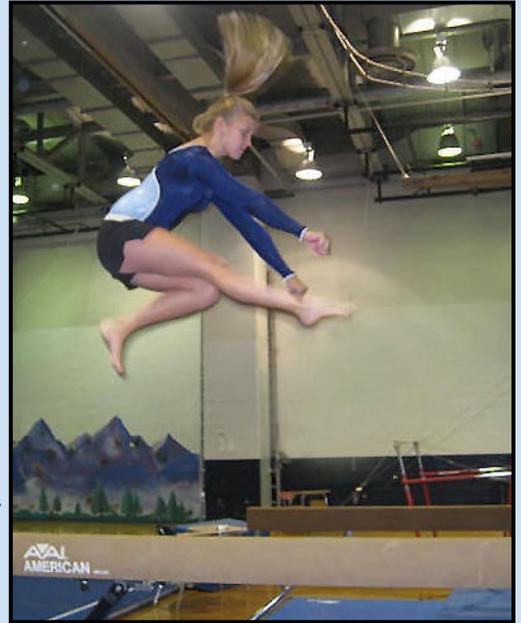
Destiny demanded that Tracy would one day become a gymnast, after all, she began practicing for the sport while still sleeping in a crib. Twice Karen and I had found her roaming the house long after she and her stuffed animal friends had been tucked in for the night. Determined to learn how this feat was being accomplished, we waited, and watched, and eventually we saw our not-yet two-year-old scaling the sides of her crib with the amazing agility of Sir Edmund Hillary repelling Mount Everest.

Rather than running the risk of her plummeting during one of her nighttime escapades, we thought it best if she made the transition from crib to "big girl" bed. But in hindsight, how could we have known that her perilous climbing adventures would one day give way to her spending her autumn afternoons on blue-matted floors as a member of her high school gymnastics team? In retrospect, I now view her early years as a time when the risks she faced were comparably minimal to those before her today; a time, not so long ago when "Blankie" and her Daddy's arms were more

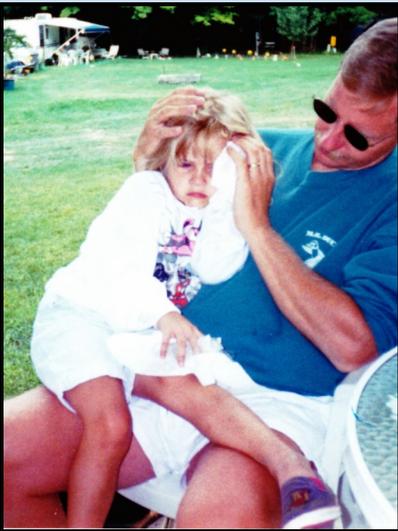
Tracy's determination to learn to ride a bike wasn't deterred—even after a fall brought her to Daddy's arms for comfort

than enough to keep her safe.

In the moments leading up to the start of the competition, both teams were warming up on the floor. A dread began to grow within me as I watched the slow and calculated maneuvers being executed atop the balance beam by two gymnasts as they tweaked their routines in last minute preparations. Tracy wasn't one of them—at least for the moment. Instead, I saw her stretching on the floor in her new competition leotards or 'leos,' as she'd recently corrected me. Soon enough though, she'd be performing and once again, I'd be helplessly watching from afar.



Tracy practicing her routine on the beam



Admittedly, what scares me the most is that when Tracy competes on *the beam*, she's on her own; potentially at risk; vulnerable, and through it all I feel as I did in the moments following her birth: absolutely powerless, and for me, this is a problem. I'm her daddy; I'm supposed to protect her and to keep her safe, after all, this has been my job forever, but today, all I can do is watch from the sidelines, helpless, doing nothing.

Her safety, her wellbeing—sadly, are beyond my control.

For almost two hours she was out there, on her own, and when she mounted the beam, I held my breath—and watched. A twist, a turn, a handstand, some fancy footwork, a surprising cartwheel, a few leaps and then an aerial front tuck somersaulting dismount—safely executed; hands raised in the air; the smile, radiant. She nailed it, again. Back in the stands my breathing resumes. She's getting better every day, honing her talents; mastering her skills.

Later, on the ride home, we rehashed the entire meet. And I realize, at least for the moment, my little girl is safe; and my grudging admission: she's not so little anymore. How did this happen, I mean, when did my crib-climbing escape artist suddenly become this sixteen year old leo-wearing gymnastics competitor anyway?

I'm well aware that my fears of watching her perform, especially on the balance beam, are in part, a metaphor for the concerns I'll always have for her wellbeing. It's inevitable that as she grows older she'll be confronted with so many of life's obstacles and when she does, I'll always be there—still a little nervous, sometimes worried, but always proud of her—just like I am today. And so, for the rest of her gymnastic career, I'll quietly remain another spectator daddy sitting in the stands; continuing as she competes to both cringe and celebrate her determination and independence as she has the time of her life, out there on the beam.

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the backstory:

We can't help the fact that as parents we wish we could forever keep our children safe from harm, but in reality, we can't. This story is about just that. When Tracy began competing with her high school gymnastics team, my job as her daddy and protector was reduced to mere observer status, and I didn't care for the demotion (but it gave me something to write about!)



Tracy today

and now...

Some years have passed since she spent her autumn afternoons on blue-matted floors. Today she's a college graduate who's considering her future as she teaches yoga and bartends in Waikiki, Hawaii (while avoiding yet another frigid North Jersey winter!) Smart girl! And me...still her daddy, still concerned for her wellbeing but absolutely confident that no matter where she may be (even 5000 miles and several time zones away,) I'm sure that whatever path she might ultimately choose, she will, undoubtedly succeed.



Tracy leading a yoga class outdoors in Waikiki

Out there on the beam was previously published in two parenting publications.