

My Mother, a Leader with Compassion

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The loud sound of her Singer sewing machine pedal still rings in my ears. Her loving, soft voice as she told me “Be a bold woman” still resonates in my daily life. I am speaking about my mother. She was both a dressmaker and a busy mother of seven who brought awareness to others about and advocated for the rights of special needs children. Balancing both tasks well was her greatest strength.

Foremost, my mother was a woman who led with strength and compassion doing the thing she knew how to do best: be a mother. Almost as much as she loved being a mother, she loved her home-based business. She was a devoted business woman, but her primary business concern was completing the work the right way, all the while spicing it up with compassion and love. Out of the seven of us, my mother raised a special needs son. She was my brother’s voice, fighting for him to have an education and a trade so he could provide for himself as an adult. She did it single-handedly; my father was rarely home because he was absorbed in his work during the day and his addiction to alcohol at night.

Now, as I look back 35 years later, I still can clearly see the image of my mother racing against time to meet deadlines to deliver finished garments to her customers. It took her a long time to finish one garment because, as she said, “If I have to do anything in my life, I have to be passionate about it or not do it at all.” When it was time for clients to pick up their finished garments, she asked them to pay only the amount they could afford. Witnessing this made me realize that my mother was not passionate about making money, even though we needed it, but she was passionate about doing the work. The proud look on her face as she delivered her exquisitely finished handiwork to a satisfied customer is a scene I will never forget. I realized when I was 12 years old that no one can put a price on compassion: compassion is priceless.

That is why my mother never priced her finished work; she wanted her hard work to be purchased by a person who would recognize and appreciate the compassion behind the work, not worry about the price.

Besides being a compassionate, self-employed dressmaker, my mother raised us all in a house that did not have a washing machine or a dishwasher. These appliances were not common during that time in the country where I was born and raised, but cloth diapers were. Despite having chronic eczema on her hands, she never complained about the pain as she washed the diapers by hand. Our clothing was always washed, ironed, and hung in the closet, and she never seemed to be behind with the laundry. Our home smelled clean and appeared remarkably neat for a family of nine. And when it came to her culinary talents, my mother's homemade meals were unbeatable. They not only tasted good but were well presented because of the compassionate touch she gave to anything she cooked. She spent time in the kitchen as if cooking were the only chore she had. She cooked for her family on a daily basis, and we were rarely served leftovers as a meal.

Besides being the family chef, my mother took the time to find an appropriate school and the necessary services for my disabled brother. "What will happen to him when I am gone?" was a question I remember my mother saying over and over again. She worried about my brother's well-being in a time when the disabled were not socially accepted, much less had the right to an education. Her loving compassion as a mother advocating for a disabled son led her to be the voice of the voiceless as she fought not only for my brother's education but also for that of other special needs children. I distinctly remember her baking cookies, popping popcorn, and brewing coffee while she hosted meetings on several afternoons with other mothers of special needs children. These meetings allowed them to learn from and support each other to provide services

for their beloved special needs children. My mother realized that she could not do it alone, that when there are multiple voices speaking out, the louder the message of educating children with special needs would be heard. As a result of her compassion and devotion, my brother and his friends attended school and received the necessary services and accommodations. Today, my brother is a 30-year-old man, semi-independent, happy, and in very good spirits which I credit to my mother's wake-up call that brought awareness of the disabled population.

My mother would never have been a leader of anything if she had not had passion and compassion for what she did. Her compassion motivated her to take responsibility for the job she had to do, no matter how hard, how much money it cost, or how much time it took. Her compassion set an example for my siblings and me to follow in our lives. My purpose for doing anything has been and is to do it passionately and compassionately, no matter how difficult or time consuming. When I was growing up, I could not understand my unusual behavior, and I thought that something was wrong with me, but realizing that my mother set an example of compassion in action explains my behavior today as I compassionately take charge and lead any task I am assigned.

Even though my mother left this world in 2008, her legacy of leading with compassion is still alive, and I am proof of that. In 2008, I made the decision to return to college and complete my education. My mother taught me not to settle for average but, instead, to pursue a higher standard, no matter what the circumstances. Until recently, I did not understand why I chose to pursue a degree in the special education field. However, I fully understand now, and it is because of my mother's influence. Exposure to my mother's compassionate nature over the years as she was leading the special education awareness group shaped me to become the compassionate daughter I am now, pursuing a special needs career to lead my own special needs

classroom. Undoubtedly, compassion fueled my mother's motivation to lead, and her example still reflects in my life today as I lead as a mother of four children and a special needs educator.

A compassionate female leader is needed no matter what environment, society, or time period we live in, because women have always encountered difficult challenges on a daily basis. That is why I feel gratified to see my mother's compassion reflected in my 16-year-old daughter's behavior. I credit this inspiration to my mother, who was my first role model and who took control by creating a caring and compassionate atmosphere for all the lives she touched. Being compassionate is engraved in my soul, and I am blessed that it is. I use compassion in my everyday life, even if it is just by greeting a stranger on the street. My mother's gift of compassion did not die with her. I believe it is and always will be alive through me and, I hope, will be passed on to many generations to come.