

Ellie Daugherty

Dr. Kinyon

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I've never known a whole lot about how my mom grew up. I knew the basics, of course: she was the youngest of seven siblings, had grown up on a dairy farm with her lumberjack father and teacher mother, and had been a straight-A's kid for most of her life. However, I don't think I ever quite understood her past life until one, special moment.

See, her side of the family owns a cabin in northern Wisconsin near where she grew up. It was built by my grandfather himself, and today, this house is owned by all of the siblings and used mainly for family vacations as well as my uncle's occasional crazy hunting trips. After one of our trips up there, on our drive back home, my mom decided to stop by the old family farm. I'd never had the chance to see it in person, but had heard plenty of stories which frankly, made it sound less than ideal, to say the least.

I'd always known that her family wasn't particularly wealthy, and with seven kids to take care of, the house was always crowded. Moreover, between taking care of the farm, the lumber company her father ran, and all the daily chores and homework, it was certainly never easy, either. Legends of how her older brothers tortured her growing up only corroborated that fact. My mom would laugh amiably as she described such pranks as the time my uncles threw her favorite stuffed animal in the garbage truck, forcing her to watch it get grinded up by the hydraulic presses as she bawled uncontrollably. It was usually somewhere along this point that I'd interject and say she was borderline traumatized, to which she would chirp back that it was all in good fun.

Regardless of all the crazy tall tales I learned to get used to, she would never claim they were anything but happy. Sure, it was rather simple, but they had their business and they had each other, so what else could they need? Even still, regardless of what she said, I'm not sure I ever truly believed it. It wasn't until this moment that I could see that this life meant a lot to her, sadly more than I would ever get to know.

As the car came to a stop at my mom's childhood address, it seemed as if time had stopped along with it. As it would turn out, the farm had been taken down, and my mom's home had gone with it. In its place was a garden, one that my mom had never seen before, and she quickly rushed out of the truck to investigate.

After a weekend of running around northern Wisconsin with no electricity, wifi, heat, or any real alone time, I was exhausted and decided to stay where I was. Watching my mother, though, I saw a side of her I'm not sure I ever have before. I realized I'd never get to see that home, or the farm, or the version of my mother who'd grown up there. I'd never even get to meet my grandfather, and as she made her way back to the driver's seat, teary-eyed and sniffing, that fact hit me full-force. Maybe her family growing up wasn't perfect, but it was worth something to her I couldn't describe and will probably never truly understand. Even as her daughter, there's still so much I have yet to learn, and so I set out to learn it. Because as insane as she and her various antics can sometimes be, she's not only the most amazing person I've ever met, but more importantly she's my best friend. If there's anyone I can learn something from, it'd be her.

With all of that out of the way, I'd like to introduce you to my mother: Raye Daugherty. As an adult, Raye is an ill-tempered, impatient, badass of a patent lawyer. She works at Quarles & Brady in the city of Milwaukee, and has been working there for over a decade now. She once told me a story of how her employees had submitted reports about having her as a boss, and that

the overwhelming consensus was that she was “intimidating” to work with (I will never let her forget this).

Before that, though, she was a fairly average girl from the Midwest. She got along with her classmates and teachers, kept up a consistent 4.0 GPA, and did plenty of extracurriculars. She was, all things considered, a good kid. However, during her freshman year of high school, that would all change within an instant. As she remarks herself, this event was the first time anything had ever gone wrong in her life, “and it went *really* wrong.”

It all started one day, when she came home to her mother and told her outright, “Ma, I think I’m pregnant.”

Now, this could’ve easily changed the trajectory of her entire life. It was the destiny for many girls from her area to become a “woman with six kids on welfare” and nothing more. Even most of the men had gotten accustomed to the idea of never being able to leave town, as most families just didn’t have the funds for college. As smart as she may have been, it seemed she was going down that exact same path.

Her mother clearly thought the same, as she dropped to her knees, “and I’ll never forget the look of disappointment on her face, said ‘oh God, what are we going to do.’”

It wasn’t long before her dad came in after them. As the man of the house, his reaction was the one my mom dreaded the most. Despite being as much of a jokester as his sons, he was also a fierce businessman and an even fiercer father. What he said was virtually law within their household, and while he was kind, he was also very strict; my mom could only pray that he’d understand.

Upon realizing what had happened, however, his decision was immediately made clear. He walked into the kitchen, hugged my mom close, and told her forthright: “No matter what you

do, you will always be my little girl”— and that was that. After that very conversation, he left and went right back to work as if nothing had occurred at all. My grandmother followed his lead almost instantly, turning to her with determination in her eyes and declaring: “well, if you’re gonna have this baby, it’s gonna be a healthy baby. Let’s go get you some juice and some milk and something to eat.”

Suddenly it became clear to my mom that this didn’t have to be the end of her life as she knew it. She didn’t have to let this misstep define her forever, and although it wouldn’t be easy, it was doable. She said the very same thing to me the day I interviewed her, “You have to know that you can deal with it and come out okay on the other side.”

This is part of what makes my mom so special, I think. Whereas such a big life event would be expected to slow anyone else down, it only seemed to make her work harder. She was open about the pregnancy itself to her peers, and once it was out there she says it simply “it wasn’t that big of a deal.” She was even elected vice president of the student council a month before her baby was born, and throughout everything, she would laugh about it with her friends, “because what are you gonna do? You gotta laugh through it.”

In fact, when asked if she had anything to say to all the people who knew her, all she could really think to say was “thanks for supporting me during that time and believing in me.” One of the economics teachers, specifically, she remembers, “was known as being a really hard-nosed guy and being difficult... and then I got pregnant and I thought ‘oh, this guy’s going to be horrible to me,’ and he wasn’t.” He would check in on her in class, consistently encourage her to reach her full potential, and even bring assignments to her house to make sure she could complete everything on time.

Ultimately it was a hard period of her life, but it wasn't anything she couldn't handle. When my half-sister was born, she was given to my mom's older sister who had long since graduated college and was at a point in her life where she could afford to raise a young child. The baby was taken somewhere she would be fully taken care of, and life went on fairly anti-climatically.

That was, until two years later. I mentioned earlier on that I'd never get to meet my grandfather. Well, that's because when my mom was eighteen years old, Richard Michlig passed away tragically and suddenly... and it was devastating.

Hell, for the sake of transparency, I'll even admit that I'm crying while writing this. Although I'll never get to know my grandpa like I wish I could, I do have stories to give me an idea of the kind of man he once was. As my mother has said, both he and my grandmother were good people through and through; "better than me," she'd assert. In my grandparents' house, there was never any kind of drama or fighting between mom and dad, just the kind of respect and love that has fueled our family to this day. Her mom was always there to take care of everyone, ensuring their home was always somewhere you'd want to be, and her dad provided the funds to keep them on their feet.

"They were salt-of-the-Earth, kind people, and there was nothing in life that could've been as bad as [her] father's death," she said, and I believe that wholeheartedly.

At this point, though, my mom hardly had time to grieve. Not only was she forced to grapple with the pain of losing a loved one, but her family had also just lost their primary source of income. With college being just around the corner and her siblings all old enough to be living their own separate lives, she had virtually no one to fall back on.

Luckily, this is where all her hard work in school paid off, and she earned a full-ride scholarship to MSOE (Milwaukee School of Engineering). As a part of the first generation in her family to attend college, this was a momentous accomplishment that she did not take lightly. She took the most practical path she could, one she knew she could succeed at and subsequently make enough money to provide for herself without having to rely on her family. As she puts it, she didn't take the risk of experimenting with her passions. "I guess maybe that's just not my personality, either. I don't like not having a plan. Understatement of the year, right?"

In many ways, that's what makes her the woman she is today. She's as much of a hard-nose as her economics teacher from all those years ago, although it's worked out pretty well when all's said and done. Despite the troubles and the turmoil, she's still an incredible mother, lawyer, and friend to those who know her. Above all, she's learned to be resilient, and without that sense of determination, who knows where her life could've ended up.

I attempted to ask some of those more hypothetical questions, such as what she thinks would've changed if she hadn't gotten pregnant when she did. Ultimately, she said she's learned to be humble. "I honestly think that if I hadn't gotten pregnant, I might've been kind of an insufferable asshole."

Because at the end of the day, she may be some big, "hot-shot" lawyer now, but deep down she's "just a kid who grew up on a dairy farm in northern Wisconsin." She's a weirdo, she's intimidating, but most of all she's my mother. She's living proof that whatever life may throw at you, it's always possible to get through.

And after I finally finish writing this, I'm going to send it to her, and I'm going to have to listen as she corrects me on all the small inaccuracies, jokes about how I made her seem crazier than she really is, and maybe even gets a bit emotional like she did in our interview. But if

there's anything I want to make clear with this long-winded article of mine, it's that I love her, and that I have the best mother in the whole entire world. And to my grandpa, who's voice lives on through my mother's whenever she's on the phone with clients or colleagues, thank you for everything. I may have never met you, but this article is for you, too. I hope you're happy wherever you are, and just know that your daughter continues to make us all proud each and every day.

Query Letter

Dear Mr. Dawson,

I'm contacting you with a proposal to publish a feature-length article on a community member within Milwaukee. Raye Daugherty, a patent lawyer at Quarles & Brady, is a fantastic woman who I think is worth featuring in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. Not only has she been a citizen of Milwaukee for many years, but in my opinion, is probably one of the most fascinating members in the entire city. She's won awards for her work in the law field before, but I'd like to propose something slightly different. I've performed an interview with Mrs. Daugherty about her personal life, and I think it's something worth sharing. Furthermore, think detailing her successes in this article could be a good opportunity to uplift the entire community. Wisconsin is often dismissed as being an insignificant section of the Midwest, but as someone who grew up in a small, obscure, northern part of Wisconsin, Mrs. Daugherty has made it clear that those sentiments are entirely misguided. I hope that in sharing her story, readers will be able to look to her as someone they can relate to. If you're interested, I'd love to divulge more details and hopefully secure a spot in the Sentinel in the future. I look forward to hearing back from you, and thank you so much for your time.

Sincerely,

Ellie D. Daugherty