

Becoming My Dad

Author: Joseph S. Pizzo

Dad, as you know, when I was growing up, my goal in life was to play center field for the New York Yankees. When I realized that athletically I didn't possess the gifts to accomplish that dream, I thought about being a disc jockey on the radio. I knew all of the music, and I would listen to and imitate the way show hosts Cousin Brucie, Casey Kasem, and Dan Ingram would read ad copy, chat with the listening audience, and add luster to their introductions to the music of Elvis, Chuck Berry, Sam Cooke, and more. I would put in my single ear plug on my hand-held six-transistor radio and lose myself in these shows. However, as you know, Dad, I was a shy kid who was awkward socially. How could I, the kid who once was standing next to future Hall of Famer Phil Rizutto in a hallway in Yankee Stadium and despite mom's encouragement to say hello was too timid to do so, ever think that I could be a disc jockey? Being gregarious is a non-negotiable requirement for a radio host.

Dad, our family has always believed strongly in divine intervention. I may have lacked the talent to be a professional athlete and the poise and confidence to be a dynamic radio personality, but somehow I had the yet-to-be-discovered ability to be just like the greatest gentleman I have ever known: you, Dad. I believe that God understood the fact that I was a handful of clay, and the artist I needed to inspire me to mold myself into a finished piece of art was you. God made you my dad so you could be my role model. All I had to do was to pay attention to the way you comported yourself and the joy you always seemed to inspire in the hearts of everyone who knew you.

Dad, you always spoke in a gentle, soothing voice that was filled with richness. You were kind, generous, understanding, and always approachable. Even with your quiet nature that rarely

was replaced with anger, you were gregarious. I remember going to the bank or the store or even to the gas station with you, and you were sure to be greeted by more than one individual who made the effort to stop whatever they were doing so they could chat with you. Their faces would all burst into smiles, and there was a sincerity to the respect that you would always receive. You took a genuine interest in everyone, and you chose to focus on the goodness that each of them harbored in their hearts. You encouraged everyone you met by making them feel that they each were the most important person alive. You were a best friend, a confidant, and a problem solver to all who were fortunate to know you.

Dad, you somehow always knew when I was struggling with an issue or a problem. You never demanded that I tell you what was wrong. You never told me that I shouldn't worry. Your wisdom allowed you to know that these two strategies would have a very small chance to be successful. Instead, you would pat me on the shoulder and let me know that you would always be there to help me if I ever needed your help or advice. You empowered me to decide what direction I would take. You would then pat me on the shoulder again and reassure me that you were proud of me.

You know that I was always a perfectionist. Things had to be just so. You taught me that there was another way to deal with things. Dad, you helped me to realize that not everything that I do has to be perfect. You taught me to deal only with the issues and situations that could actually be changed without compromising my beliefs. Moreover, you showed me that complaining about things was not worth the energy that it took to do so. When I would spill a bowl of ice cream or drop a glass on the floor, you would help me to clean up the mess while never scolding me. You gave me the benefit of the doubt. I am so deeply grateful for the trust that you always placed in me. Author Alex Haley vowed always to "Find the good, and praise

it.” In fact, he had that phrase engraved at the bottom of every piece of his stationery. Dad, you had the phrase etched deeply into your heart, and you have engraved that same phrase into my heart.

You are a great man, Dad. You made sure that you treated with a strong sense of genuine caring and concern, all who were fortunate enough to know you. Even though you have passed away more than twenty-five years ago, I don't allow one day to pass when I am not thanking God that he sent me to you and Mom. I don't know if I shall ever have the beauty in my soul that you possessed. Even so, I shall continue to strive toward achieving that goal. You served as the perfect role model. You accomplished the things that I continue to work at every day. You have given me the perfect map to continue to overcome my shyness while I treat everyone with kindness, generosity, and understanding. I shall always try to remember to be approachable to anyone who might need a smile or the chance to share a story of their own success. I shall give my best effort to be reasonably encouraging to everyone I meet while placing the spotlight on them rather than myself.

Dad, I realize that my dream of playing centerfield for the New York Yankees is a memory rather than a wish, and I know that I am a bit too old to be hosting a pop music show. Even so, I have been a middle school classroom teacher who shall be starting his 50th year in the classroom in November. I have found the confidence to teach public speaking and deliver speeches and professional development workshops. I may not be broadcasting live on my own radio program, but I have created a couple of podcasts that allow me to chat with authors, teach poetry, review interesting books, discuss educational issues, and even help a friend when he needs some copy read as a public service announcement or a commercial advertisement. I have been told that my voice has a richness and a comforting sound. Without any hesitation, I

immediately smile and say, “I have been blessed with my dad’s voice.” It is the confidence that you have instilled in me that gives me the confidence to take reasonable chances and to greet everyone with your sense of dignity and level of interest.

Thank you, Dad, for the valuable lessons you have taught me.

Thank you, Dad, for the patience that you have shown me that now serves as my foundation as I am attempting to build my own legacy.

Thank you, Dad, for being the role model you continue to be in my life.

I am proud to say that even though this journey still has many more steps for me to take, I am finally becoming you, Dad. Thank you for your inspiration. I hope I can make you and Mom even more proud of me before I leave this earth.

Author’s Note:

I am an Integrated Language Arts teacher of 49 years at Black River Middle School in Chester, NJ and an Adjunct Professor at Centenary University in Hackettstown, NJ. Because of the kindness and support with which my dad inspired me, I have gained the confidence to invest in others while creating a synergy of positive goodness in my students and my colleagues. The pride that I take in my students’ accomplishments is similar to that which my dad always took in my accomplishments. I strive to make him and my mom proud every day.

A middle-school English teacher in his 49th year, Joseph Pizzo teaches at the Black River Middle School and has served as an Adjunct Professor at Centenary University since 1992. Pizzo has been the Educator of the Year for AMLE, NJCTE, NJAMLE, and NJ S.H.I.N.E and a member of the WWOR-TV Ch. 9's A+ for Teachers Hall of Fame. This former NCTE Historian, present member of the NCTE Children’s Poetry Book Award Committee and AMLE’s Early Career Educator and Teacher Leader Committees, he is the former president and current Executive Board member of NJCTE, NJAMLE, and the NJ Autism Think Tank. Pizzo has taught at Union County College and College of St. Elizabeth, is a NJ Schools to Watch Core Leadership Team member, and a podcaster of *A Writer’s Journey*, *A Spot of Poetry*, and *We Have Issues*.