

It's Just My Mom

Fidgeting in my space on the hard industrial carpet of my classroom, I prepare myself for the set of presenters getting ready to speak to my 6th grade class. One of those speakers happens to be my mom. I have no idea why she is going to speak to my class; my teacher appears to think she is worthy of departing some sort of life changing knowledge. I think long and hard about this perplexing idea, since she is just my mom. Looking back on my selfish, awkward eleven-year-old self, my grandfather's words come back to me, "Education is wasted on the youth." Another piece of information I have stored away through the years, wondering why he would say those strange words. Today, at the ripe age of forty-four, I now understand.

My mom, the lady who patiently cleaned up my pigsty of a room, washed my clothes (mounded on my floor dirty or clean), kept me on track for school, friends, and other obnoxious childhood events, is the woman I most admire. It took me many years to comprehend her accomplishments, deep dedication, and strength.

In 1956, at the age of thirteen, my mom, encouraged by my grandfather, began to competitively swim, rather than just be the tadpole residing safely in her large, backyard, childhood frog pond of a pool. Women in 1956 were not considered to be desirable athletes. The budding thirteen year old should have been learning to cook, clean, and primp herself in preparation for marrying a strong male counterpart to support her blissfully until death do they part. My grandparents were forward thinkers of the time and allowed my mom to choose her own path.

As the years moved forward, she began to swim for the Berkeley YMCA. Their team was small, but held its own with the help of a strong young coach. Her high school schedule was unforgiving when she left for swim meets. They, too, did not believe female athletes were advantageous to support. Many times failing her for the days she missed. Her classmates heckled her for her short, wet hair she arrived to school with, and the overdeveloped shoulders she built strong with the hours of hard work. She carried on with her passion despite these over judgmental fools.

As the summer of 1960 approached, she worked hard to juggle the hectic training schedule. Her parents continued to support her. They drove an hour to practice each day to deliver and gather her, as she diligently blossomed from the small tadpole in the backyard to the brilliant butterflyer she had worked so hard to become. Passionate and committed, her focus was about to become recognized on the world arena.

She arrived in Rome, Italy in the stifling heat of August 1960. With her nerves ready to beat her, she plowed through team dinner with a ferocious appetite for a pasta only the Italians could offer. Apparently, the traditional meal of the gods filled the wings of the butterfly readying her to compete. In a world record-breaking time, she achieved what some only dream of. The gods of Olympus shinned, and she achieved the shining honor of being the best; she was draped in gold not just once, but twice.

While she moved forward from this experience, as one of the world's best, she never asked for the attention it would produce. Giving speeches always frightened her, committing to engagements with social hob knobbing was not her favorite, but through it all she kept her head up and motivated others talking about her humble tadpole beginnings in hopes to inspire other young athletes. "Education is wasted on the youth," rings true now as I peer to catch a glimpse of how much her contributions have influenced so many. Admiring the obvious obstacles of her achievement, I am still glad to know that, in the end, she is just my mom.