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# WEEKEND BREAK

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# LOVE IS A DECISION



Photos courtesy  
 Muriel Jensen

From left: Patrick,  
 Kathy, me, Mike

## My favorite moments as a mother

By **MURIEL JENSEN**  
 For *The Daily Astorian*

**I** thought I had all the qualities required to be a good mom — patience, kindness, caring — then Mike, Patrick and Kathy moved in with us and I discovered I was lacking in nursing skills, psychiatric training, arbitration abilities and battlefield experience.

The morning we went to pick them up, I got up early and put a little vase of flowers on top of each child's dresser. When we got home, I stood by to help as they unpacked, and discovered that children that age have the strength of gorillas. Opening drawers to put their clothes away, both boys yanked so hard, they knocked over their flower vases, which dumped water into their top drawers and soaked their socks and underwear.

Toy trucks and trophies go on top of dressers, not vases filled with water. Lesson learned.

My distress over the vases was eased by hearing myself called "Mom." I'd waited so long for it.

But ... do you know how many times a day three children can say, "Mom? Mom. Moom!" (Of course you do, but I was new at it.) Or how many times the back door can slam as they go in and out? One time, though, I turned away from the stove at a slam to see my daughter holding out a dandelion bouquet. Mushy heart and guilt overtook me. Those qualities would define me until my children grew up.

I was particularly proud that Thanksgiving when friends invited us to share their dinner. The kids ate like starving refugees at home, so I was a little concerned. But our hostess' mother gushed over them because they waited patiently for everyone to be served before digging in. I basked in her praise.

Her kind words still hung in the air, however, when I looked up to see all three children wearing black olives on every finger. They waved at me with them. I laughed. I'm still not sure if that should have required more sternness, but they seemed so 'mine' in that moment that my spine was oatmeal.

### Becoming a mother

I was particularly heroic one sunny summer morning when Kathy came screaming across the backyard from the park, her eyes wide with terror. Mike said one of the boys at the park had put a bug in her hair. Oh, no. I feel about bugs the way Indiana Jones felt about snakes.

I approached her reluctantly and parted her hair to find the biggest, fattest, beetley-looking bug I'd ever seen. It buzzed and its many legs struggled, trapped in the red-brown tangle. I knew I had no choice. I grabbed the thing with my thumb and forefinger and



From left: Kathy, Patrick, Mike



From left: Patrick, Kathy, Mike

pulled. Those many legs flailed and the buzzing grew louder as I fought to free it. By that time I was screaming as shrilly as Kathy was.

Mike, the protector of his younger siblings, wanted to stomp on it, but I felt obligated to set a nature-lover's example and went to the door and tossed it out to freedom. Patrick watched the arc of the bug's path into the yard and turned to report gravely, "I don't think those fly, Mom."

Mike patted my arm. "Don't worry. He probably died on impact."

Groan. But Kathy was calm again. And, absurdly,

I felt for the first time like a mother rather than an imposter.

### Getting to know them

Mike was gregarious and interested in all kinds of things, particularly carpentry. He put cup hooks on the inside of my kitchen cupboard to hang the measuring spoons I could never find in the drawer. As a young teen he made me a roll-top jewelry box I still use today, a butcher block and a very efficient cherry pitter made of a simple nail and a jar. He owns a small construction company today.

Patrick, athletic and quiet, was not one to share his feelings. I worried about that a lot. I understood his reluctance to share with me. I, after all, was responsible for soaking his socks and underwear. But what would his life be like if he couldn't learn to give and take?

He played basketball in high school, finally growing into his feet and muscle. In one particular game, he was all over the court, blocking, rebounding, scoring.

I'd been afraid I'd never get to really know him, but that night I felt as though he finally knew himself. He exuded skill and confidence. And he was smiling.

My husband, Ron, leaned over to say quietly, "No one cries at a basketball game, Muriel."

Well, I did. My child was happy after all. He just had to be on a basketball court to show it. Today, he drives a truck for UPS.

Kathy possessed impressive organization skills. (Easy to tell she isn't mine by birth.) At 8 years old, she had a closet that was organized by color and length of the garment, and led me out of a department store in Portland after I'd gotten turned around. She's owned several businesses and currently sells insurance.

### The love you work for

I apologize if this sounds like a boastful Christmas letter. I just want to make the point that I think love is a decision. Romantic love involves dopamine and oxytocin that make us helpless under their power, but learning to live with other people, even your family, requires a determination to make it work without emotional aids — except the love you work for and learn to nurture. I thought it took maturity to understand that that's where courage and comfort come from. But I watched my children make that very decision. For basically self-involved little beings, they were surprisingly generous and forgiving. More so, sometimes, than I was.

I so wish I could do it all over again. Isn't that every mother's wish? I'd be softer, kinder, less worried about their future and more focused on how important the present moment is. Because it's over in an instant.

*Jensen has written for Harlequin since 1984. She's published 93 books in the American Romance line, Superromance and Harlequin Historicals. She lives in Astoria with her husband, Ron, a Westie mix named Claire, and a pair of Tabby cats. She has three children, nine grandchildren, and the great-grands are still coming.*