

Retired to Parenthood

Tee time is at eight am after perusing the local paper, off to the golf course with the men or shopping with the girls, lunch at the club and casino night to wrap up the day. Retirement is a time for people around the age of sixty to move to the west coast of Florida to play golf and spend time at one of the local country clubs making sure they make it in time for happy hour. This was my grandparents plan, but something else seemed much more important. Wake up, have a bowl of cereal garnished with raisins and sliced bananas, watch the deer in the yard, go to the gym or take a walk, read a book, and then its time to take Jackie boy to hockey practice.

Retirement to my grandparents involves being actively involved in their grandchildren's lives and moving to Racine, Wisconsin trumped moving to Florida because of this very reason. People ask why they moved to Racine of all places and their first response is, "My grandchildren are there". My grandparent's house is a quarter of a mile from my auntie's house, which is exactly a half-mile from my parent's lake house. Living so close to each other is comical but I wouldn't have it any other way.

When my mom found out she was pregnant a week before leaving for college, their less than twenty four hour period of anger and shock quickly ended with support and a bouquet of flowers. Of course, when you see your eighteen-year-old daughter pack up her belongings in preparation to start a new and exciting journey, the last thing you're thinking is that this journey is motherhood. My mom went to Providence College for the first semester of college so she could get a glimpse of what college life was like and returned home barely ready to become a mother.

My grandparents have been parenting for forty years almost continuously. Once their oldest daughter left for college for a few months, she came home ready to have a baby. While my mom commuted to school, my nanny changed diapers, prepared meals and made sure Elmo and Big Bird were on TV for my learning and entertainment. Before bed, my Papa gave me the choice between playing the shoe game and listening to one of his "bad boy" stories from when he was a kid. In the summer, taking me to see the snakes at Lambs Farm was a weekly excursion and making sure I knew how to ice skate in the winter was crucial. Even now, whether it's teaching the boys how to shoot a bow and arrow or taking them on a hunt where the shoot animals with disposable cameras, my papa has always had something exciting to do with the kids.

When I was three, we were separated. One day I was walking hand in hand with my Papa down the street while he sang Danny Boy and the next they were looking out the rearview mirror while they drove off to Boston. Hearing the news that they had to relocate for my Papa's job broke their hearts and the tears didn't stop till Ohio. The move didn't stop the constant communication. I would wake up, immediately climb up on the chair next to the phone in my floral nightgown and press the speed dial. My Nanny would answer the phone every morning around six am just to hear the little girl on the end of the line say good morning.

"Its time to set up the baseball field! Shannon make the posters, lets get team jerseys, put up the green monster, break out the peanuts and cracker jacks!" As my Papa sets up the bases in his back yard, and sprinkles baking soda on the freshly cut grass for the foul lines, the rest of the family scrambles to make the annual summer baseball game perfect. When my Papa had a heart attack about two and a half years ago, it was the ultimate wake up call. The following summer, the entire extended family flew out for his famous baseball game, Red Sox versus Cubs. I had never seen such genuine happiness. When my Papa gave his toast to the twenty loving family members sitting in the field and hearing the tears in the background, it hit me. This is the most important thing in the world, my family. At that moment I knew I made the best choice to study at Marquette, just twenty minutes away from them.

My Nanny and Papa are a second set of parents to me and have been since I was born, but more importantly, they are a second set of parents to my siblings and cousins by making themselves available one hundred and ten percent of the time. Taking care of your high school and college aged daughters while chasing around a two year old isn't necessarily considered normal and when sorting through popular retirement locations, Racine, Wisconsin usually isn't close to the top of the list. You would think that retirement in sunny Florida would be the light at the end of the long tunnel of parenting for my Nanny and Papa but that's not the case. The light for them is not the casino nights or outings with the retired community, it's being actively involved in their family's lives.

