

The moments that make us who we are today

“Some come to laugh their past away...”

By Jill Matlow, Feature Writer, Wall Street Dead aHead Family Member



Photo courtesy of pixabay.com

When I think back, it's hard to believe this happened well over 50 years ago but the memory feels like just yesterday. I was a cheerleader in junior high school for football, basketball and wrestling. Our team colors were red and white and we all wore saddle shoes with our cheerleading uniforms back then.

At 12-years-old, I was 5'7" with SIZE 10 FEET!!

I was mortified to find out that the red and white saddle shoes we were required to wear did not come in a size 10. Trying to be resourceful, I literally polished my black and white saddle shoes with red nail polish. Can you imagine how embarrassing that was for a 12-year-old who was already feeling self-conscious about her big feet? Now I was forced to walk around in "clown shoes".

But I persevered and at the end of the day, I don't think anyone even noticed (or cared) that my shoes were "hand painted" by yours truly. Without even realizing it, that might have been a turning point for me when I discovered that embracing my so-called quirks instead of trying to hide it, would suit me in the long run. And it has. At that time, I don't think I had the emotional maturity or insight to realize how powerful that moment in time would be for me in the years to come.

One of the reasons I love being the Feature Writer for WSDaH is that it affords me the opportunity to get to know the Family members on a personal level, not just on their professional levels. I am always so pleasantly surprised to see another side revealed in a Family member.

Thinking back (or even in the present day) do you remember an embarrassing moment you had that made you want to recoil at the time, but then seemed so insignificant in the big picture? How did it help you grow in ways you might not have imagined? It's time to go a little deeper with some WSDaH Family members to hear their "saddle shoe" stories...

"I was in the 6th grade, and to commemorate the end of year, our teacher decided to award every student with their own superlative to celebrate our achievements. I watched my classmates walk to the front of the room one by one, each receiving titles that reflected their unique attributes. My heart pounded as I waited for my name to be called. As a kid that didn't receive much recognition, I was excited to feel seen.

When my turn came, my teacher smiled warmly and handed me a certificate. 'Most Shy'. Those words washed over me in a hot sting of shame when I realized that what I was being most recognized for was not having a voice at all.

As mortified as I was, something changed within me that day and ever since, I've very intentionally worked to put myself out there, saying yes to anything that gives me an opportunity to share a bit of myself with the world.

Fast forward several years. I'm standing backstage at a national modern band conference for public school teachers, about to run a lead guitar workshop. I've spent my entire career in music education nonprofit however, I was not a musician nor an educator. My work primarily focused on the administrative side—operations, partnerships, events. I've always felt like a bit of an imposter at work surrounded by 'real musicians'.

My first instinct had been to say no to the offer. Run fast in the other direction and let someone who knew what they were doing step in. But I remembered the promise I'd made to myself that mortifying middle school day. Lean in. Show up. Have a voice. So there I was, guitar in hand, my stomach in knots, standing in front of a room full of trained educators who expected me to instruct them in something I didn't fully believe I was qualified to teach.

I stumbled over my words. I missed a note or two. The imposter voice in my head buzzed louder than my sloppy barre chord form on the guitar strings. But I pushed through, determined to lean in.

As the workshop ended, a surprising thing happened. Participant after participant approached me, not to point out my mistakes, but to thank me. How they've always been intimidated to participate in jam sessions, how soloing was something they thought only 'tough shredder guys' could do and seeing me up there in my authentic vulnerability helped break down that fear. The session got nearly perfect reviews in the post-evaluations.

I went on to do that workshop many more summers, knowing my purpose was not to be the most technically proficient or project the biggest ego in the room, but to help break down the affective filter that so many of us have from a lifetime of being too shy, not talented enough, fill in the blank etc.

And I want to thank that 6th grade teacher (whose name has been long forgotten) for creating that well-intentioned but misguided activity that ultimately pushed me to find my imperfect voice to share with the world."

[Miranda Altman](#), Chief of Staff, [Education Through Music](#)

“Back in 5th grade during late fall, my friends and I were playing touch football in the school yard of PS 87. I grew up around the corner from there on 76th and West End Avenue. I was a very big football fan and the Oakland Raiders were my team, mostly because the Giants were impossibly bad, and because the Raiders had Ken ‘The Snake’ Stabler, a hero in every sense of the word. So obviously, in the school yard, I had to win every day. Could not lose a lunch time game. But on one particular day, a fat kid named Freddy, nickname was of course Fat Freddy, was getting the better of me. I can’t remember how exactly it went down, but I think I bent the rules in my favor. He accused me of cheating and he being right, got me super angry.

So when he pressed it, I hauled off and slugged him in the face. I don’t know who was more upset, me about what I had done, or him for getting a bloody mouth as retribution for being right. But I burst into tears, and begged forgiveness and all that kind of thing. And I never did anything like that again. I couldn’t believe I hit the kid. Plus I was doubly wrong, because not only was he was right, but I was also blatantly cheating. Lesson learned! In the end, he actually forgave me, and didn’t tell on me or get me suspended. Fat Freddy was a good kid.”

[Adam Zion](#), Kings County District Attorney/Senior Assistant District Attorney

“To be humbled should be seen as an opportunity. I see that now. I didn’t always and in my youth I certainly rarely did. Back then, I wasn’t in tune enough with my emotions and who I wanted to be as a person. I was more likely to react in a defensive way that would bolster my position rather than listen and learn.

I don’t know when I developed high expectations. I’m sure it came from my parents in some way. In fact, I know it did. There were the usual things: keep a clean room, be home by curfew, help around the house. Perhaps annoying to a teenager but fairly easy to do. Along with that, though, came more complicated expectations: get good grades, go to college, get a career. These require commitment, planning, and drive. Intrinsic characteristics that I had not yet developed but was expected to have in order to meet these expectations. My parents were great providers but we didn’t have the relationship where we would talk about our emotions or struggles. I had no roadmap to get me to where I was expected to be.

In architecture school, you learn to obsess over everything. Your final thesis design is a culmination of what you have learned. That includes the obvious art and engineering aspects of architecture. It also includes, though, bits of sociology, anatomy, psychology, geology, and more. All things that are required to meet an expectation (successful thesis) but take time to develop skill in.

Now, I’m an architect and partner at a firm where we get to work on projects that others can only dream to work on. I’m also a husband and father of two children from a previous marriage and two slightly older stepchildren from my current wife.

When my kids were three and five years old, the economy was coming out of a recession and I was in between jobs. My focus was on being a stay at home dad while my wife worked. I was an active father when my kids were very young but this was new. I found that I could handle the household tasks easily but the parenting part was shockingly frustrating at many times. We had fun and I loved it, don’t get me wrong. But I was astonished that these kids couldn’t do certain things. Keep food on a plate? Nope. Keep clothes clean? Nope. Keep your favorite toys away from the dog? Not a chance.

One particular moment that will stand out in my mind for eternity was when I was doing something around the house and my son was helping me. I can't remember exactly what I was working on but I know it involved tools, screws, and lots of pieces (think IKEA nightmare). It was his job to keep all of that in order and give me what I needed.

At some point, I was missing half the screws and multiple important parts. I lost it. 'This was so important! This was your job!' Blah, blah, blah. 'I don't get it! Why can't you do this simple thing?!?!' His answer stopped me in my tracks. I've never seen my son yell anything at me so emphatically and with such frustration. 'Because I'M A KIDDDDD!!!' He was five. And he was right. In hindsight and as his father, you can only imagine how embarrassing this exchange was for me. I had HIGHLY UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS OF MY SON. I deeply regretted it shortly thereafter.

I use this memory often. It humbled me. It taught me that my expectations are my own and it's not fair to expect others to automatically be able to live up to them, or even need to. Our kids now range from 16-24 so they are going through a time of development and change. This lesson comes in handy often in my family life. But I also am frequently reminded of it in my professional life. I've been working in architecture for 26 years. Most of my staff has half my experience or less. Therefore, our firm places very high value on staff development. We have to. We know what it's like to not have the tools to succeed so we take a step back, breath, and say, 'Okay, what have we learned, what can our staff currently handle, and then, what do we need to provide for them to help us all succeed?'

[Glen Cordova](#), AIA, Partner, [BMA Architects](#)

"In the early 90s, I volunteered as a newsreader at KPOO. The station is located in the Fillmore District of San Francisco. I long prided myself on maintaining professionalism as I'd been participating in community radio since my undergraduate days at Hobart and William Smith Colleges' WEOS during the early 80s.

But one day, it all went awry. Our news director, known for his speech impediments, was delivering a crucial announcement. As he stumbled over words, I felt a giggle bubbling up. Despite my efforts to suppress it, laughter erupted from me, echoing through the studio. Mortified, I tried to regain composure, but the damage was done. My colleague stared, and I could feel my face turning crimson. It was a lesson in empathy and control, one I won't forget, though in retrospect, it still makes me cringe."

[Mark Heyert](#), Vice President, [Casey Law Group, PLLC](#)

"When Jill asked me to submit an article about an embarrassing moment, I gladly accepted! I was honored that she thought of me and figured, how hard could it be to come up with an embarrassing moment that I was open to sharing. Well, that task was more difficult than I thought it would be. After a lengthy brainstorming session, I finally settled on something that happened to me when I was about 12-13 years old. Some of you may remember that time in your life as I did—I was awkward, starting to have major crushes on boys and was struggling with my physical body. With all those struggles, I still had my safe place at sleepaway camp where I could escape and, with no boys around, just be me (and be okay with the me that I was).

That summer I had a terrible case of lice at camp. I have very thick hair and after hours of trying to comb through my hair, a decision was made to cut off my hair. I was devastated! How was I the only person who got such a severe case of lice that my hair had to be cut off?! Here's where it got really embarrassing. A decision was made that a counselor at camp would cut off my hair outside of the Main House at camp where everyone could see it happening. Let me say this, no one was out there making fun of me. Everyone who saw what was happening was being supportive, but I was embarrassed and scared to see how awful I was going to look with a very short haircut.

They cut off a lot of hair. I hated it. I felt so ugly, and I cried. Here's where humanity came in. My bunkmates quickly whisked me away to our bunk where they proceeded to give me a full makeover after my horrible haircut. While I was still so upset about my hair, I felt a little bit better knowing that my friends cared about me and were there to support me.

Let's fast forward to many, many years later. I was able to take that embarrassing experience and flip it. I have happily cut off 10+ inches of hair twice and donated it to organizations that make wigs for cancer patients. I have come to realize that my hair, while still thick and full and a big part of who I am, does not define me. I am beautiful on the inside and on the outside and my hair is just one small part of who I am.

Aren't we all beautiful just by being who we are?"

[Hillary Zuckerberg](#), Director of Special Events, [SeriousFun Network](#)

Life is filled with so many serious moments yet we've all had those embarrassing moments in our lives that have forced us to either roll with the punches or bury those memories forever. Personally, I think if you're able to laugh at yourself, especially in your less-than-stellar moments, it makes you much more real and relatable to others. It builds character and humility. It exposes your vulnerability and makes you even more human.

And in the end, we all walk away a little wiser. And hopefully, not in red-painted saddle shoes...

