

A Much-Deserved Shout-Out to My Mom
Revised December 2018

My mother views the world with a sense of urgency. Every morning, she opens her eyes and think to herself, “I have means. I have brains. Life is short. What can I do today to make the world better?” And then she does it. With the tenacity of a tech entrepreneur, she does it.

I know where my mom’s work ethic comes from. She was raised by working-class Irish-Catholics, one the child of an immigrant, whose worldview was formed by the Depression and World War II. These were determined and resourceful people.

It’s less obvious where her generous philanthropic heart comes from. The family of her childhood was provincial, clannish. They were understandably focused on their own immediate subsistence. My mom seems to have crafted her giving heart through sheer force of will, informed by her devotion to fairness and desire to connect with people and know their stories.

When my mom and dad moved to San Diego in 1996, she was already a seasoned activist, coordinator and speaker having worked since the mid-70s as a sometimes part-time, sometimes full-time volunteer for a peace-initiative nonprofit in Los Angeles. After moving to San Diego, she narrowed her gaze on education. The Preuss School UCSD was just breaking ground and my mom was intrigued by their mission; to prepare low-income students for college. This appealed to her because she was an elementary school teacher in her early career, having been told by her father that if she wanted to go to college, she could study either teaching or nursing as those were the only two suitable careers for women. The Preuss mission also appealed to her because she was the first in her family to earn a college degree. So was my dad. Both of my parents are well aware that their college educations had enriched their lives; intellectually, financially and even spiritually.

When Preuss opened its doors in 1999, my mother volunteered as a mentor. Once a week, she made a sack lunch (probably a bit gourmet) for herself and her mentee. They’d eat together and talk about life. My mom’s mentee is now 30 years old, and their friendship endures. In fact, in many ways my mother has become the mentee, as Jacky has, with trust and patience, educated my mother (and indeed all of us), on what it’s like to be a black woman in America. (Hint: It’s challenging in a way white people of privilege can’t even begin to imagine.)

My parents started making financial commitments to Preuss, helping fund their bus program, sponsoring events, serving on their board and introducing other members of the community to Preuss and their mission. By the time Jacky was ready to graduate, my mom knew she wanted to participate in funding her college education. My mom and dad formed a family foundation (The Patricia & Christopher Weil Family Foundation ‘WFF’) and my mom turned to the San Diego Foundation (TSDf) for a crash course in scholarship giving. After encouraging TSDf to make some custom adjustments to their program so she could be more hands-on, and having recruited my dad, my brother, my sister and me to work alongside her, in 2004 WFF launched the MKC Scholarship

(using the initials of us 'kids') and awarded eighteen scholarships to the inaugural class of the Preuss School UCSD.

Now, fifteen years on, the MKC scholarship continues to be awarded to students from the Preuss School, as well as to students at Gompers Preparatory Academy, the Barrio Logan College Institute, and Borrego Springs High School. We also sponsor two Masters scholarships, one through UCSD's School of Education, and one at Just in Time for Foster Youth. Some might find the two plus million dollars awarded to over 300 scholars an impressive accomplishment (and it is). But what has always made the biggest impression on me is the relationships my mom builds with the scholars. She personally interviews every qualified applicant. She attends their award ceremonies and their graduations from high school. She sends them small gifts and cards to commemorate their rites of passage. She has them to dinner at her house or takes them out for a meal when she visits a city where they live. Having kept track of their interests, she invites them to the theater, the symphony or to museum exhibits. When she's able, she attends their college graduations, their weddings, their baby showers. She introduces them to people in the community to make vocational connections. She listens to them, so she can better understand and be an effective advocate on issues of education discrepancy, opportunity disparity and racial inequality. She's taken these kids into her heart, and they've taken her into theirs.

Having built a robust and respected business, and being a kind, charismatic and handsome guy, my dad sometimes makes the bigger impression, at least initially. Sometimes I worry that my mom feels under-appreciated. But there is no question among those of us in the know, that my mother's vision is the catalyst for this work and her ongoing passion and drive is the reason it thrives. Having had our mother write the roadmap, cultivate the relationships and earmark the money, it's been considerably easier for my brother, sister and me to integrate ourselves into the work of the family foundation. That's been a gift. But my mother's greatest gifts to us have been providing the ongoing inspiration, modeling the method and from the very beginning, imparting the moral compass. The work is bigger and spread among all of us now, but our mom remains the heart and soul of the work we do.

Next up for the WFF is considering the future of the foundation; beyond my mom and dad. Beyond my brother, sister and me. The grandchildren (ranging in age from 23 to 14) are a natural option, and nothing would please my parents more than to have the grandchildren pick up the mantle, assuming they're interested, and up for the challenges that come with working as a family to give back to the community. As I step back and examine where we are now, I realize that without setting out to do so, my mom, the plain-speaking, young-for-her age octogenarian with the dancing Irish eyes, has created the life's-work of a family. Without explicitly intending to, she's crafted a personal legacy that reflects the hopes and dreams she had for herself, and indeed has for everyone whose life she touches.