Goodbye For Now, Mom (Pam Decker 1950-2022)

July 3, 2022 By Shawn Decker

On the last day of June my mom continued her sleep, no longer bound by a body that had betrayed her. Her pain, in every way this life can deliver it, is over. Your work here is done, Mom. Thank you for your love and for fighting for me… See you again on the other side.

Goodbye for now, Mom…

For those who didn't know, Pam Decker was a force of nature. If you knew her, you knew that. If you met her in passing just once, you had a hunch. As her second son born with a rare bleeding disorder and what would be a lifelong knack for collecting viruses, I was gifted a unique perspective in which to view such a loving and strong presence. She was the kind of mom that I needed: a fighter.

She had to be. For different reasons than me, she had to grow up a little been faster than most kids. The oldest of five kids, she did her best to keep the household of modest means a runnin'. She worked to put herself through college, which came natural because she'd been working in one way or another for most of her life. In adulthood, she helped out her family as best she could, even after she started her own.

And I gotta say- I'm so thankful for the house I grew up in. Where a woman was the head of the household. Not that dad was totally passive, he picked his spots, but like me he probably realized early that Mom was the sharpest tack under our roof. She worked longer hours, while Dad helped pick up the slack and did the laundry. Dad respected her authority, and knew that the best life possible for all of us, within our middle-class reach, was going to be with Pam at the helm. When my medical realities became apparent, Mom was better suited to deal with that kind of stress and the crash course in learning about hemophilia, then hepatitis B, then HIV… what could have been something that enfeebled me psychologically actually empowered me, thanks to her instincts and foresight.

Mom innately knew that lessons far more important than what I could be taught in school needed to be passed along during hemophilia-related hospital trips. There, I learned the power of positive thinking, empathy for others, caring for the less fortunate. She also let me know I wasn't the only person in the hospital, that there was always someone just down the hallway that had it much worse than me.

Not to say it was all serious business in the hospital. Or at home. Dad had a knack for silly humor and comical observations, but my sense of the darker side of humor comes from Mom. For instance, when her little brother passed recently, she told her niece that, when she (Pam) gets to Heaven she is going to give him Hell for cutting in line. Which made my cousin laugh, which is something I'm sure she needed. At her best, mom could get the real shit across in clever ways and say exactly what someone needed to hear in real time.

When I was little, she'd take opportunities to teach me a big lesson, but she could also switch gears. In the hospital I learned about life and death- it's where I processed my own feelings about the potential of

an afterlife. But if I interrupted her to ask her to draw a maze for me, she would. Also, if a doctor came in that she thought was incompetent, she wouldn't hesitate to show them the door. "You're not learning on the job in this room, kid," is the kind of thing she would- and could- say to someone if they didn't pass her smell test.

Mom created an important spiritual foundation for me, which really came in handy after the HIV diagnosis at 11. With my body under quiet attack, it was so important for me to understand my soul exists in addition to the hunks of meat temporarily tasked to incase it. During the scariest, private moments of introspection after my HIV diagnosis, when I wondered just how bad my health would get before the end, I always breathed a little easier thinking that my soul might live on. That I'd be surrounded by love on my way out of this realm, as I'd always been, really... I knew every single day that my life, as hard as it felt, could end tomorrow and I'd still have had a better time than most get the opportunity to experience.

Mom also believed in guardian angels, or at least she said so in a pinch when I was a far more inquisitive person than the jaded scribe you read today. As a kid, the idea of guardian angels set my mind at ease. She told me that her grandmother was a guardian angel to me, and that distant memory makes me smile at the thought of their celestial reunion. Oh, and Mom also said they probably look the other way when their humans pick their nose or do something nefarious, as kids are summoned to do from time to time... I was ("... was? Uh huh, son... riiiiiiiight.") a bit of an imp growing up.

Oh stop it, Mom. This is my blog post and I know you didn't want a service but you're getting a nice write up here so can it, will ya?

In life, Mom found it much easier to give love than to receive it. Which is why my dented and mourning heart smiles at the idea of her being greeted by the people she loved most during her time on this particular portion of the shitshow we all call life. I like to think she is now in a state of existence that is fully capable of feeling that love without the fear of eventually being hurt. That those things in her life that never quite made sense are as easily understood for her as knowing a good doctor from a bad one was.

The last several years, Mom faced some medical challenges of her own. ("I challenged the medical conditions, not the other way around, son!") OK, out of respect for her privacy, and her Rock-like dedication to protecting her image as the legitimate badass, I will tread a little lightly here. What I will say, is that I am comforted by the thought that Mom is no longer in pain. And that her vibrant spirit has now been freed from the body that could no longer keep up...

In recent months as her health declined, Mom didn't want to find out what new or which old medical condition was causing her pain. As much as I tried to pay back her due dilligence in cracking my medical codes, she refused to engage the multiple choice question: "What exactly is killing me right now?" And who could really blame her when "D: All of the Above" is one of the potential answers?

So I accepted her wishes, all things she'd informed us all about a long time ago. Thankfully, I had Gwenn, friends and my brother and sister-in-law to talk through it all with. Knowing someone is loving someone, and being perceived as strong and in charge have always been a huge part of Mom's identity. Being able to work was also so important to her- which had been taken away. It seemed like she was losing the ability to do so many things that were important to her... and I am so thankful that we all decided to respect her decision and needs.

One thing I'll say- I'm glad she had Dad there to take care of her. ("Watch it, son...") Oh, relax, Mom. At the time of her passing, we were at the point where hospice was going to be required. That would have

ruffled Mom's feathers a bit, and her feathers had certainly been ruffled more than need be over the last few years.

As a result of her isolation, my last conversation with Mom was about a month ago. She lives about an hour away, and my brother had texted me that I needed to get over the mountain. Thankfully, he lives right across the street from my parents. When Gwenn and I got there I reverted back into fix it mode… I wanted to know what made her fall, what was going on, how can we turn her home into a world of foam the same way she tried to protect her clumsy baby boy after she found out he had a bleeding disorder… I didn't get any of the answers I wanted because Mom didn't have them. She didn't want them. She was tired, and my pesky questions were stressing her out.

As she'd done for me in the hospital a lifetime ago, I switched gears. Gwenn talked to my dad as I leaned in close to mom for our last mom and son pow wow. I apologized for getting pushy, and I verbalized how much I loved her and was thankful that her love and support had given me the health and incredible life I've been able to enjoy. That I understand that she is feeling bad, in so many ways. I kissed her on the head. I told her I loved her. That I will honor her wishes. She told me to look after my big brother, who takes these things harder than I do- not that I'd had any experience, but momma does know her boys.

It was such a real, vivid moment that I am thankful for.

Of course, I did pop in a couple of days later to drop something off for Dad. He invited me in. "Are you sure?" I asked. When I came in Mom started to give me the evil eye, or give me the business about going back on my word. I guess Dad wasn't sure. ("Oh shit Shawn, I thought you just barged in I'm sorry, son.") It's cool, Mom. I just gave her a smile and a nod. I leaned in and gave her a quick kiss on the head.

"Love you, Mom, byeeeeee!"

Well, that wasn't exactly our last Earthly encounter. I have to write all of this out, with respect to mom's sensibilities as well as a respect for my inability to remember details if I don't write them down here in this ol' blog.

The morning she'd passed in her sleep, I woke up with "Your Wildest Dreams" by the Moody Blues in my head. It's my first memory of the day before I got the the news. As Gwenn and I hurried to make the trip over the mountain to be with our family, I turned on music to help my brain sort through itself. My "Songs That Sing to Me" playlist being the most reliable. The playlist currently has 63 songs in it. I always do random because any great album or playlist should work regardless of song order.

One of the songs on there is the one I woke up to, playing in my head.
I flipped to my Playlist as I was sorting myself and I said: "Don't do it… Mom."

When I hit Play the damn song came up. I laughed. I cried. I know it's technically 1-in-63 odds and that's easy cover for a meddling-way-too-soon guardian angel, right? Also, will I ever learn to not tell my mother what she can and can't do? ("No, you won't, Son.") Good lord Uncle John get a handle on this you were a priest don't you have any pull up there? Anyway, the next song that came up was "It's So Easy" by Guns 'N Roses. I figured Mom had taken her finger off the playlist, if it was ever on there to begin with… shit, maybe it was just a coping mechanism aided by coincidence?

Then a lightbulb went off as I looked at my phone.

It's.

So.

Easy.

("... to pull off shit like that when you're a guardian angel! Ha!")

Now you're stepping on my lines, Mom.

I know that it's going to be a new "normal" of sorts moving forward. End of life matters are so complicated, and can be so divisive. I'm just glad that she was honest about what she needed, and that she is now resting easier in a world that is far beyond my wildest dreams...

Positively (".... ending on a Blues lyric?") Yes, Mom, I am... who's messing with who, now? Ha ha! Now go do something spooky for Kip or I'm going to conjure up some embarrassing story to end with...

Anything?

Nothing?

That's what I thought.

I love you, Mom. Thanks for literally everything.

Positively Your Pookie Forever,
Shawn
My Mom requested no service or memorial, but I'm sure she'd be ok with you making a donation in honor of Pam Decker to Planned Parenthood.

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