Happy Birthday, Mom

What would have been Mom's 72nd birthday just so happens to fall on Labor Day. My tribute to the hardest worker I've ever known.

September 5, 2022 By Shawn Decker

I write a lot about birthdays that would have been... in the last year a couple of huge inspirations on my HIV journey, Ryan White and Pedro Zamora, would have both turned 50 if they were still with us in body. This Summer I turned 47, my slow and steady march to half a century continues. Odds are that I'll make it- my health is stable and I'm probably taking better care of myself now than I ever have before.

But one thing that my Earthly ride has taught me is that any one of us can go at any time. Being diagnosed at age 11 in 1987 necessitated a comfort level with my mortality and an understanding of the cosmic fact that we all must say goodbye. Or perhaps, "See ya later!", if my hunch of an afterlife holds true.

My mom did her best to make sure I saw as many birthdays as possible after my diagnosis. The prognosis back then, considering that I'd been exposed to HIV years before my diagnosis, was that she probably shouldn't expect more than a couple of birthdays. Her goal was get me to high school graduation. She always aimed for the stars just to make sure she cleared the fences.

My Mom would have turned 72 this Labor Day. Which is appropriate, considering that she is the hardest worker I've ever known. Sure, I'm biased. But anyone who has ever known her would back up the claim. As the oldest of five siblings, she took a job early in life to help support the family. She worked to put herself through college. For her, there wasn't much of a choice in the matter. She juggled her work ethic with her family life, helping to raise two boys. The youngest would present some pretty significant challenges, from being born with a bleeding disorder to "collecting viruses" through the treatments the condition required, from hepatitis B, to HIV, to hepatitis C.

The hits just kept comin'. I can't imagine the grief that she felt each time the odds got stacked a little bit less in favor of her youngest boy's survival.

For Mom, I think work was therapy. And, on this Labor Day, she can finally rest.

One other thing about Mom is that she hated celebrating her birthday. As a young adult, I think I challenged her on it. Probably because I'd been spoiled for basically all of my birthdays and wanted her to sit back and soak in the accolades and adoration of loved ones. She kind of lashed out a little, saying something to the effect of her birthday not meaning much when she was a kid

so she didn't need any bells or whistles as an adult and just wanted to be left alone on her birthday.

I never challenged her preference again, and it's probably the saddest thing I ever heard her say. So this year, I decided all of those bells and whistles that I'd kept in storage out of respect for her pyschological wounds would come out in full force right here on the blog. I know Mom loved it when POZ opened up a few doors for me, and as a result of the magazine's belief in her then-20-year old son they earned her undying admiration.

So, if her spirit and energy is beyond the Earthly wounds of what her own birthday represented while she was alive, I'd like to think that she's at peace with it all now. If our lights align as one in the afterlife, and our journeys really make sense fully after our souls are released from our bodies, then my heart sees her with those that went before her. People that, as she puts it, "cut in line" of her. Ryan Almarode, one of my most spirited friends and confidants during my early teen years.

And Ryan White, who she absolutely adored.

My imagination was always encouraged, and it came in handy after HIV when I immersed myself in art and music and slasher movies, which showed that there were far worse ways to go than a death from AIDS. So I fall back on that imagination today, as I picture mom's first post-body birthday celebration... and what's surprising is not the amount of loving spirits whose lives she impacted in a positive way while sharing the mortal real estate that is life on Earth. What's best about the vision is her acceptance of being celebrated. I can see her dancing, skating, laughing- all the things that brought her joy.

I have plenty of memories of my own joyous birthday celebrations, and the gifts that she could probably barely afford to buy. I can't imagine the receipts that are amassed when you throw what may very well be the last birthday celebration for your youngest child. If it meant working longer hours to pay those things off, she certainly did that with no complaints.

As the fates would have it, though, I didn't cut in line. I got to receive that reminder that my birth mattered to my loved ones. Every year. A tradition that continues to this day, even if I choose to forego a party for a quiet night in with Gwenn. The feeling is always the same- gratitude that I'm here and I've always gotten the one present that, essentially, is all that any of us really care about.

Which is feeling safe. Feeling loved.

Mom was so loved. So appreciated. And so essential in so many lives outside of her own family. She was just so much more at ease expressing love to others than she was receiving it.

I just called my dad to make sure he's doing ok. He's watching old Twilight Zone episodes. I'm reticent to share too much of someone else's process on this blog outside of my own. But I am thankful that Dad is getting through this as best as can be expected. Mom taught me so many lessons, which I've been very public about sharing. Of all of the lessons my Dad has taught me, it's how to stand by your love. To do your best to support them. Mom's life provided a lot of wounds,

as do all of our lives- it's inevitable. Dad took his role as her life partner very seriously. They were opposites in many ways, but that really just made them a good team in the end.

Part of the reason why I can so easily imagine Mom's spirit finally giving in and allowing herself to do a celebratory triple axel on roller skates in celebration of her existence is because, in her final days, Dad was there for her. She had no choice but to allow him to take care of her, fully, because she wanted to be home. She wanted to die at home. That means that, above and beyond all, she felt safe at home. As safe she made all of us feel, regardless of the challenges that life threw at her family.

Love you, Mom. As I said to you in our final conversation, I couldn't have had a better one. And, whether you like it or not, I will celebrate you on every September 5. Maybe not as publicly as this, but the significance of the first day that you graced this realm with your presence will be recognized, as it should be. What's best about that is that, no matter how many directions my vivid imagination can take me, there's no route that lands on you having any problem with that whatsoever.

Positively Your Pookie,

Shawn

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She encourages me to write and share my life's lessons.

And I love her more than iced mochas.

Which is saying a lot!

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