Growing Up with a Disabled Parent

By Miriah Burns

A triple threat is how I describe the experience growing up in my unique family. Not, however, in the common use of the term. My mother’s disability, lower extremity paralysis with a below the knee amputation, is just one of a trio of traits that make our family different from the norm. The second trait that makes us distinctive is that my “sister” and I are unrelated foster children. The other idiosyncrasy of our family is the lack of a father, as my mother raised us by herself. The triple threat traits triggered a medley of parallel emotions for all three of us, pertaining to loss, acceptance and self-esteem. My mother taught us to use the triple threat as a strength by focusing on how the traits catapulted us through challenges that we may not have succeeded at otherwise.

When we were young, we had nobody to compare our situation to, so it was normal to us. We didn’t know that other children didn’t ride around on their mothers’ laps in a wheelchair, or that their mothers didn’t take their leg off when they got home. Nor did we realize that we were missing a traditional family member, a father. We also didn’t comprehend that being a foster child was unconventional. What was most unique about these eccentricities is that they were not outwardly apparent. My mother used a wheelchair full time at home, but does walk outside the house within limits. Despite her limp, the severity of her disability is undetectable. Similarly, also undetectable was the fact that we were not her biological offspring, not biological sisters and had no father. We were not what we appeared to be to the outside world.

There were certainly visible clues to my mother’s disability that others would pick up on. My Mom couldn’t trudge through the snow, so she would sit in the car by the hill that we would sled on, while other parents joined their children. She tried skiing, but it was not possible with the extent of her paralysis, so, again, she was a bystander. My mother may not have been able to participate, yet I appreciate that she gave us all of the opportunities that other kids had. My favorite time was our yearly summer camping trips. It was on one of those trips that a friend of my mother’s taught me how to ride a bike, since my mother was unable to run alongside me. My mother, sister and I certainly felt sad at times that Mom couldn’t partake. We learned to accept and make the best of it.

My mother taught us that along with ingenuity and imagination, when it comes to situations that appear challenging, “Where there’s a will, there’s a way”. She also exemplified the power of facing our fears. She bravely joined a dance company, clearly knowing that the experience would provoke sadness as she faced loss and limitation, since she had danced prior to her disease onset. As I begin my search for my birth parents, I know that I, too, can adeptly face my fears.
My mother models triumph in the face of adversity. She got certified as a personal trainer after college, and won a national bodybuilding championship. I remember playing in the kitchen next to her while she rode her stationary bike in preparation for the contest. She had to tie her real foot to one pedal and often had to take off her prosthesis to dry her leg because it was slipping off. She has been a model of discipline and determination. At the same time that she was training for competition, my sister and I were preparing for figure skating competitions. We learned that working hard and persisting paid off.

There were times when I was embarrassed that my mother was disabled. She drives with hand controls. I dreaded when friends would ask what they were. Often my friends’ reactions were of intrigue and thought the controls were “cool”. I could then breathe a sigh of relief.

Fearful times were exacerbated by not having a second parent to lean on. My mother would get infections in her foot that could lead to another amputation. We all did our best to stay positive and resilient.

Humor has been a significant tool for our survival. My mother always laughs when she retells the stories of her leg falling off in a parking lot and at the gym, and when her foot was on backwards in a store. I, too, am able to laugh at myself, which is a great coping mechanism.

Living with my handicapped adoptive mother has most definitely made me less judgmental than I might have been without this experience. I’ve learned that there are many invisible causes for what makes people who they are.

I have learned to focus on capability. As I pursue my education and training to become a professional dancer, I accept my limitations and embrace and enhance my redeeming traits. I owe this wisdom to my disabled mother. I feel extremely lucky to have had her as my parent and role model.