

COMMENTARY

David McGrath: My father had courage to spare for his anxious 13-year-old son

By David McGrath
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Gertrude and Charlie McGrath, David McGrath's parents, at home in Oak Forest, circa 1982. (Family photo)

Probably because I thought it was personal, and even a little embarrassing, I had always kept quiet about that day with my father.

It was the year I stopped going to Aqua, our swimming pool complex in Evergreen Park. Instead, I stayed home that summer, watching “General

Hospital” on TV or the Cubs’ day games, even as my brothers and friends from St. Bernadette School were meeting at the pool every day.

Rule No. 1 at Aqua was that before entering, you must take a nude shower in a large open area of the changing room, just like in the prison movies, an experience that took a while to get used to.

But by the second summer, I had acquired an angry red scar shaped like a boomerang just above my waistline, the result of a gash from a freak accident with a jagged piece of metal while horsing around with some friends.

I was 13 years old, a gawky, guarded age for boys, so I was petrified at the prospect of the other people staring at it when I undressed.

After patiently but futilely trying to talk some sense into me, my father offered to leave work early one day and drive me to the pool. We would change together, he said, and I could stand behind him if I preferred, so no one would even see.

It was a sunny and busy Friday afternoon at Aqua, when at least a dozen other males, including a couple of boys close to my age, were in various stages of undress. As the two of us were getting ready, my father struck up a conversation with another man about the White Sox’s chances of winning another pennant.

In his 40s, my father was portly, and I was immediately conscious of his bowling pin shape and the many red marks on his skin, like a permanent rash that I had not noticed before. But his confident smile and unrushed pride about being there with me, which he somehow signaled in his steady tones and easy conversation, reduced my scar to irrelevance, if not invisibility.

Sneaking a look around, I saw the others listening to what he was saying about when to use pitchers Hoyt Wilhelm and Gary Peters.

“Who else did you say, Dad?”

He turned to me and answered with the name of some other pitcher whose name I don't remember; I had only asked to make sure everyone knew I was his son.

The relief I felt being with him was so overwhelming that I could scarcely believe there had ever been a problem. I rode my bike or walked with my friends to Aqua nearly every day the rest of that summer, unrolling the bath towel holding my trunks, not bothering to hide my scar.

Years later, when I eventually had my own son, I reflected on the ferocity of my father's love that day, when he left work to protect me. And I was just one of his eight children.



Charlie McGrath with his son, author David McGrath, circa 1955. (Family photo)
Parents ache to give all they can to their kids, and I hoped I would be able to answer the call when any of mine had problems they couldn't handle alone, the way Charlie McGrath did for me.

Decades later, though I meant to bring it up with my father and ask him if he remembered, I got busy, or forgot, and he died at age 73 before I got around to it.

I trust he would forgive that I took so long and am instead writing about him now, so that maybe other fathers out there might learn from the best.

Naturally, I still have it today: my red badge of courage, just under my belt.

Courage bestowed my dad, who had plenty to spare.

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