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## Editor's parents taught values by example

By MARIE P. GRADY

The assignment seemed simple enough.

I was asked by Anne-Gerard Flynn, Unlisted and Newspaper in Education editor, to write about a person of character who greatly influenced my life.

My first instinct was to decline, partly because we like to save precious news space for the ruminations of people other than newspaper staff.

But I knew the assignment was part of Anne's efforts to let our young readers get to know our staff better. I also knew it would give her a rare opportunity to edit the managing editor.

How could I refuse?

As I thought about the assignment, I recalled some of the people I've been privileged to meet because of my profession. There was a president and a vice president, several governors and attorneys general, to name a few.

I've also been privileged to work with some great journalists and good souls, some here and some now gone.

But none of these people taught me anything about character that I didn't already know. My mother and father had already done that.

Like other rebellious teens, I didn't waste a lot of time thinking about my parents' character when I was growing up. I probably wished at times they had less of it.

But perhaps rebellious is too strong of a word. I have always been independent, and now I realize that particular trait came from my mother.

She left County Mayo, Ireland, at 16 and traveled to Worcester, Mass., alone to find work.

Beyond an uncle she had probably never met, she didn't know a soul in Worcester. But she found work, later meeting my father and starting a family that would eventually number six children. Along the way she was among the first in her circle of friends and relatives to work outside the home and to learn how to drive.

Like many Irish Catholics, she is religious but not to the point of not being able to question her church.

There were days, no doubt, when she might have wished she didn't have such a strong-willed daughter. But she did teach me how to make it on my own.

Do you know someone who refused to shrink from life's challenges? That person is already teaching you something about character.

### ***Kindness.***

When my father died 2 1/2 years ago I was struck by the words of some of those who remembered him. "He was such a kind man," they said. And I knew it would have been so easy for the compassionate man I remember to have become cold, hard and distant.

Like my mother, my father emigrated from County Mayo, Ireland. He had a chance to get a scholarship to further his education in Ireland, but he was needed to work his cousin's

farm. He later moved to Worcester, where he worked for the gas company and the post office.

He raised six children with my mother, but lost two others. When I was in my mother's womb my 5-year-old sister was dying of leukemia. My then-4-year-old brother was suffering from funnel chest, a congenital abnormality in which the chest caves inward toward the heart.

At about the time my sister died, my brother was going through a horrific medical procedure to straighten out his chest. And my father was hand carving a headstone he made for my sister Eileen because they couldn't afford to buy one in time to bury her. But it was a Catholic cemetery with strict rules for tombstones, so they made him take it down. A kindly old Italian man who ran a headstone business eventually let him buy a gravestone on an installment plan, and he worked several jobs to get it paid off. Today, my brother, long since recovered from his operation, is married to the Italian man's granddaughter.

I have only recently learned about the headstone my father made. My mother tells me as we visit his grave. I can picture his big, knotty fingers painstakingly carving my sister's name on the stone that would ultimately be rejected.

The headstone they bought bears the names of my sister Eileen and my sister Patricia, who died just before she was delivered into this world. The stone also bears an inscription my parents probably paid extra for over time.

"God gives us love. Something to love he lends us."

Do you know someone who refused to give in after a great loss? That person is already teaching you something about character.

### ***Perseverance.***

When I got into a horrible car accident as a freshman in college, I wanted to quit. After my head went into the steering wheel, it took months for the bruises to go away after surgeons reattached part of my nose and repaired my lip and a laceration above my left eye. But my mother would hear none of that.

I eventually went back to Northeastern University and became the first of my parents' three daughters to get a college degree.

Honesty.

This is something I learned from my parents, and although I would not claim never to have fibbed, honesty does matter. The flip side of this is that I've been told I can be brutally honest at times and uncompromising, but I am mellowing a little with age. At least I think I am.

Do you know someone who speaks the truth, no matter the consequences to himself? You are already learning something about character.

### ***Courage***

Without knowing it, my parents also taught me about courage. They both battled cancer and my father worked his way back from a devastating stroke, not to mention a broken back earlier in his life on one of his second jobs. Along the way, despite the hardships, they never lost their sense of humor.

But courage isn't just about dealing with illness; it takes courage every time you refuse to give in to your own fears.

Do you know someone - a parent or friend - who struggled on when others might have caved in to self-pity? They are already teaching you something about character. My father is gone now, but I can still picture him playing his accordion, eyes half closed in some far-away dream. Or telling a joke in his deep Irish brogue, a wry smile escaping just at the punch line. The smell of Irish bread baking will always conjure up an image of my mother, always with her hands busy, surrounded by the cacophony of family. They would be the first to say they weren't perfect parents, but they taught me more than they will ever know.

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