The Social Worker’s Kid

Kendra Kavan

My Mom never wears a watch. She’s says it’s because she’s allergic to nickel, but I think it’s because if she did, she would realize that she spent three hours in Wahoo Super, “Your Only Locally Owned and Operated Grocery Store,” when she went with a list of only nine items. Or perhaps she doesn’t wear one because then she’d know for sure that she was late picking up her daughter from basketball practice. Again. Tardiness is a given with my mother, and it’s not because she’s incapable of quick movement that she can never escape a public venue in a timely manner (she was a varsity jock in high school, so I know she can move quickly). It’s because she has some sort of indelible tattoo, in freak-only ink, proclaiming “Social Worker” in between the wisps of chestnut bangs on her forehead. Apparently such a mark is difficult to remove when you’re a social worker who lives in a town of only four-thousand, the biggest location in thirty miles, and you have three-hundred-plus people as clients.

For the record, my mother would kill me if she saw that I just referred to her clientele as “freaks.” Words have been always been something she patrols with my dad, my brother, and me. There are few things that make my mom angrier than hearing a disabled person referred to as a “cripple,” someone mentally ill or developmentally disabled called a “retard,” or anyone out of the social norm dubbed a “freak.” Those derogatory words particularly offend her because, as an ABD (Aged, Blind, and Disabled) caseworker for the State of Nebraska for the past eleven years, most of her clients fit one of those descriptions in the eyes of society.

I don’t remember the first time it actually occurred to me that my Mom’s occupation hugely affected my whole family. Keeping our references to disadvantaged people politically correct is just one facet of how the social worker of the house affects family dynamics. At the age of two, I was already familiar with sexual ethics for children. I knew that my “bagina,” my bottom, and my chest were all my “special places” and that no one should touch them. My Mom’s college internship at the Child Saving Institute had her speaking with pedophiles on the phone on a daily basis, so her maternal protective instinct was amplified by her job training. It was a positive thing, of course, that I was aware of the dangers of sexual predators, but for a toddler, it did create some problems.

For instance, when I was hospitalized and needed a clean-catch
specimen, my mother sat intermittently laughing and crying in the hallway as I screamed, “That’s my special place and you don’t touch me there!” to a chorus of snickering nurses trying to calm me down.

My Grandpa Vennie also took the brunt of my Mom’s lessons when he teasingly swatted my tush and I wheeled around to explain to him that he was not allowed to touch my “special place.”

As I got older, my Mom’s lessons didn’t stop. Her first position with the State of Nebraska Health and Human Services System was as an Adult Protective Service worker in Omaha. As her office was downtown and my brother and I were only ages four and eight, we didn’t get to visit very often. However, when we did make a trip to Mommy’s work, we had to walk past druggies, drunks, and the homeless to get there. I was both fascinated and frightened of this strange world beyond the sheltered, small town of Scribner, Nebraska, where we lived. But I’d hardly been able to process why grungy adults were milling about, jobless, before my Mom gave me one of her strictest homilies: “You don’t be afraid of people, Kendra Angela. You keep your head up when you walk by people. Look them in the eyes so they know you’re not afraid.” I’m pretty sure my eight-year-old brain didn’t full comprehend what this lesson really meant until later. Plus, it was preoccupied with the ducks gliding across the lake in Heartland of America Park, but regardless of whether I fully understood her or not at that moment, her wide blue eyes assured me that she meant business.

As usual, the red light on our answering machine was blinking in the office as I walked in to use the computer.

I hit the button. “4-4-9-7. Call me back. I want to talk to your Mommy,” the raspy voice of a familiar eighty-year-old, Bohemian woman crackled on the machine before I heard the dial tone.

“Mom,” I shouted. “Mildred called.”

I heard her sigh softly before she picked up the phone, and then I heard the beeping of keys as she dialed the number. I hardly paid attention as she talked Mildred through yet another crisis, probably concerning Frankie. Mildred called my mom, at both work and home, multiple times a day for years. Clients aren’t supposed to call their caseworker at home, but Mildred wasn’t a client. Her brother, Frankie, was the client, and Mildred took care of him. I’m not supposed to know that Frankie was a client; I’m not even supposed to know his name. But one weekend Frankie needed to go to the eye doctor and the service van for the elderly, Wahoo Busy Wheels, was already booked up, so of course, my mom volunteered to give him a ride. Apparently, this opened up the floodgates. I met Frankie, and Mildred called
Mom at home.

Mildred’s frequent phone calls were simply accepted as a fact of life by our family until her death two years ago. Her voice however, lives on, as it has become a running joke among us. Mildred was always telling us how she was “so sick,” “so tired,” and “so nervous.” So we all picked up those lines and never stopped using them, my mother included, because they make us laugh. My Mom usually needed a laugh after fulfilling the role of Mildred’s counselor, lawyer, and most faithful friend on a daily basis. Befriending old, neurotic clients wasn’t in her job description, it’s just another one of the many services my mother offers.

I knew this conversation with Mildred was nearing conclusion as my Mom reassured her that everything would be alright, and that she should go take one of her “nerve pills,” then lie down for a nap. I knew Mildred had complied when my Mom clicked off the phone and headed back into her bedroom.

There was a time when my mom spent two weeks lying in bed. I remember not really knowing what was wrong with her, other than that she was really tired and nauseous all the time. I learned later that she’d gone off of her anti-depressant medication cold-turkey, and it wreaked havoc on her body. Her depression has been a part of her for at least as long as I’ve been living, even though I didn’t know what it was until I got older. I didn’t understand how someone who could be so kind and patient with an annoying eighty-year-old couldn’t deal with me having a few friends over to stay the night after the Friday football game. I knew when I went to friends’ houses that their mothers didn’t spend nearly all of their time at home shut away in their rooms with the shades drawn, but my mom did.

Looking back, I realize that most peoples’ mothers don’t spend their days determining eligibility for food stamps, Medicare, and Medicaid, so perhaps that’s why they aren’t so emotionally exhausted when they get home from work. Most mothers don’t have to tell families who try their hardest that they’re financially over eligibility to qualify for food stamps when they’re barely getting by on Ramen Noodles. Most mothers don’t listen to genuine sob stories eight hours a day, only to be expected to function in the “real world” of high school basketball games and watching American Idol, just like everyone else.

My Mom doesn’t see people the way others do. People are her passion. Despite the sad stories that bring her down at work, my Mom has some sort of insatiable optimism that will have her cooing at even the ugliest
of babies. If there is any good at all to be found in someone, my Mother will find it. Take the pervert that lives down the street from us—he’s four-hundred pounds of unwashed government mooch—but “he has very pretty blue eyes."

I’m pretty sure my Mother chose to be a social worker because she comes from a divorced, alcoholic home and her job’s her way of trying to save the world. Her brothers and sisters didn’t fall far from that desire either. They all work in people-oriented occupations, and it’s clear they’ve all sought a way to fix the broken in other people. Just because she can see the broken though, doesn’t mean that my mom is judgmental. When it comes to the underdog, my mom will always give them the benefit of the doubt. “Big Red,” a name we affectionately called one of her tough, red-haired clients, is living proof of her complete open-mindedness for all walks of life. Big Red came directly from the State Penitentiary to the Saunders’ County Health and Human Services branch. My brother and I walked into that office one day to find him out in the lobby, chatting with our mom. Although we showed no reaction while he was there (our mom trained us well), when he left, we couldn’t stop asking why his short, stringy body was covered in awful, red blotches. My mother hadn’t noticed the burns running up and down his arms, neck, and face, making his red beard disappear in patches, and my arms hurt just looking at the scars on his. Upon his next visit, my Mom learned that he’d been burned trying to escape from his trailer while inebriated, because a man had lit the trailer on fire with a Molotov cocktail. When my Mom inquired if the man responsible for the fire had been arrested, Big Red had a simpler answer.

“He’s been taken care of.”

“As in, he’s not on this earth anymore?” my mom asked eyes wide, mouth parted.

“Yup.”

My Mom’s job has been a huge definitive of who I have become. Her love of people has bred my own love for people, and I constantly find myself doing the same things she does: watching people, running late, trying to determine people’s background by looking at them. I have been fortunate enough to inherit many of her qualities. I’m a fast talker, a compassionate friend, a fighter for the underdog. I also have some of her flaws. I have had my own food addictions, my own battle with depression, my own vulnerable heart. I may never have an eighty-year-old who feels the need to call me every day because my heart’s just big enough to handle it, or even have a
murderer become my friend. I probably won’t get approached by the local schizophrenic at Pizza Hut, or have to turn someone down who’s over eligibility for food stamps. But I will try and teach my kids to love and accept people, like my mom does. I will teach my kids to protect their “special places.” I hope to be able to tell stories as well as she does, and smile when I’m hurting, and love unconditionally, like she does. I guess I’ve acquired it, though it’s a little subtler, that indelible ink on my forehead reading “The Social Worker’s Kid.”

Kendra Kavan is a junior in English Rhetoric and Professional Communication from Wahoo, Nebraska (yes, Wahoo is a real place; no, it’s not very exciting). She loves to read, write, blow bubbles, and draw with sidewalk chalk. She intends to spend her remaining semesters at Iowa State enjoying maturity regression before she enters the “real world,” and finds a job in publishing and editing.