

Writing Sample: My Hero

Late at night Erin would creep down the dark stairs and quietly turn on the television. She did this a lot when we were little. Erin's horrible leg cramps at night often woke her, and she would watch TV until the cramps subsided and she could get back to sleep.

I don't know how old she was exactly, but she was pretty young that night that my mother, awoken by the noise, came downstairs to try to convince her to go back to bed. That night was different than the others, because Erin had turned the channel to an infomercial, and not the usual re-run of an old sitcom, or a cartoon. On the TV was one of those tear-jerking "specials", with a celebrity spokesperson showing images of starving, orphaned children in a third world country. My sister sat weeping and despondent in front of the television, trying to figure out how she could save those sad, starving children with the money in her little piggy bank.

It must have been hard for my mother to comfort Erin, an emotional and passionate little girl, as they sat together on the couch in the middle of the night. I know that that was a profoundly pivotal moment for my mom, who knew that she couldn't save all the poor people of the world, but she knew had to make a difference. That night she promised Erin that she would find a way to save lives, and she promised herself that she wouldn't let her daughter down.

A bad car accident that mom and I were in, gave her the inspiration to fulfill her promise. The accident did some heavy damage to that old Buick, but mom and I came out of it with only a few minor cuts and bruises. The neighbors had called an ambulance, which arrived quickly from the local volunteer Ambulance Corps. I remember the ride in the ambulance being very scary, with all the medical equipment, and the paramedics, bustling around, pulling tubes and wires from compartments, and talking about us in a code of medical terms that I did not understand.

After our car accident, I was very worried about the ambulance getting in an accident too, and I remember begging with the driver not to speed, and not to turn the sirens on. The paramedic tried to sooth me with a toy ambulance, which I scoffed at. "What was an 8 year old girl going to do with a matchbox car?" But that ride to the hospital was different for mom. She saw how the crew carefully packed us up. She saw how they took the time to examine the scene, ask questions of us and the witnesses to find out why and how we were hurt. She saw how the driver and the medic treated their patients, with respect and care, how they listened to my pleas to drive carefully, and how they eased my fears and distracted me with a toy, and explained with compassion what would happen once we got to the hospital.

Soon after, mom joined that same Ambulance Corps. That was 20 years ago. Since then, my mother has saved hundreds of lives, and touched thousands. Growing up, hardly a trip to the grocery store could be made without someone coming up to my mother to give her an update on their elderly grandmother who had been taken to the hospital after a fall, or their son's stitches after a bicycle accident. It was painfully embarrassing as a 12-year-old—no matter where we went, (the store, school play, the bank) someone had a story about the day they met my mother, and how much her special care, and attention, and skill had changed their lives.

Mom's ambulance service had its affect on me as well. My childhood memories are shaped by the Ambulance Corps. in so many ways. Mom would bring us with her when she was on duty. There was a TV and a playroom. The bedrooms and the training rooms were great for hide and seek, but we were taught early on that we had to be quiet, and when the claxon or phone rang, we needed to stop moving around entirely, so that the dispatcher could get the instructions or listen to the call. It was always scary when a call would come in. We never knew what mom was going to face; a horrible accident, a mental patient, a death. Every call meant someone's life would be forever changed.

As I grew up I realized that every call changed my mother's life forever too. I remember one day, coming home from school to find my mother in our kitchen, covered head to toe in blood. Despite being a medic, and volunteering often, I had never seen my mother covered in blood at all. I am sure looking back, that she must have always changed clothes before coming home, probably so she wouldn't scare us. There she was though, blood smeared on her shirt, and down her pants. I stood in horror.

Mom was talking excitedly on the phone as I stood there; trying to figure out if my mother was the one bleeding. Quickly she got off the phone and blurted out, "I delivered a baby today!" "Huh?" I said. I did not understand. My mom had a baby? I already had two sisters. I didn't even know my mom was pregnant! And where was the baby?

After a little explanation, it started to make more sense. My mother had wanted to be the medic on a healthy birth call since she had joined the Ambulance Corps. That day she helped delivered a baby boy. Mom has stayed in touch with the family all these years, attending birthday parties and even Seth's high school graduation.

There were less happy days at our house as well. I remember two bad car accidents in particular that mom was called to when I was in Jr. High. They were both gruesome accidents involving several High School students who had been drinking. After all the bad calls that mom went to, she would come home and hug us, and tell us how much she loved us. But after these two calls in particular, I remember the hugs lasting longer, and the warning about drinking

and driving really hitting home. I knew that I would never drive drunk, or get the car with someone who had been drinking. Besides the risk to me and to my friends, it would be horrendous for my family, especially my mother, who would likely be called to the accident. I could never shake the image my mother painted in my head of her coming up on a wreck to find her daughter, hurt or dead in a mangled vehicle. I could never do that to her.

Family outings were often interrupted by my mother's volunteer job. There were dozens of times when we were driving and saw an accident, and had to stop. Mom always stopped. Sometimes my sisters and I would help too, depending on the accident, and who else was on scene. I got really good at running to get the first aid kit, calling 911, and holding traction. It was a running joke in our family that we couldn't go anywhere without stopping at an accident. But after the duty crew got there, and the victims were safely off to the hospital, we would all go back into the car and continue on. It was just a part of our lives.

The scanner was on all the time. By the time I was 15, I could tell the difference between the different tones, their meanings, and which town they belonged to. Several times during our family dinners, mom would get up quickly, and rush out the door, knowing that she was closer than the ambulance, and would be able to get to the call first. As a teen I joined the Ambulance Corps. as an "explorer", and would get to rush out the door with mom to go to the chemical spill at the hardware store, or the house fire, or the accident. It felt wonderful to finally be able to be a part of my mom's special world.

Since joining Perinton Volunteer Ambulance Corps., mom has been a volunteer at several of the local Ambulance Corps., sometimes even volunteering at 2 or three different towns a week. Mom has taken her love of teaching, and turned that into a career. She became a CPR instructor and an Instructor trainer in 1990, and has literally taught thousands of people how to save lives.

My mother started her own company three years ago, Community Emergency Response Training and Service, (C.E.R.T.S.) and continues to teach and manage a team of instructors. That team is responsible for the majority of CPR and AED training that goes on in our area. The C.E.R.T.S. tagline is: "Teaching the Skills that Save Lives". Mom, the company and her trainers are well-known and respected in our community. Mom has even been nominated as a Monroe-Livingston County EMS Educator of Excellence, for three consecutive years, and was presented the Award in 2003. That recognition though, and the countless others she has received in the last 20 years pale in comparison to the reward of the job itself.

The impact that my mom has made is incredible. She has saved lives, changed lives and made a difference. Hardly a day goes by even now that I don't run into someone who says to me, "Oh, you are Kathy McParland's daughter!" And no matter where I am, I stop and I listen proudly to the story they tell about how my mother helped them when they needed it most.

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