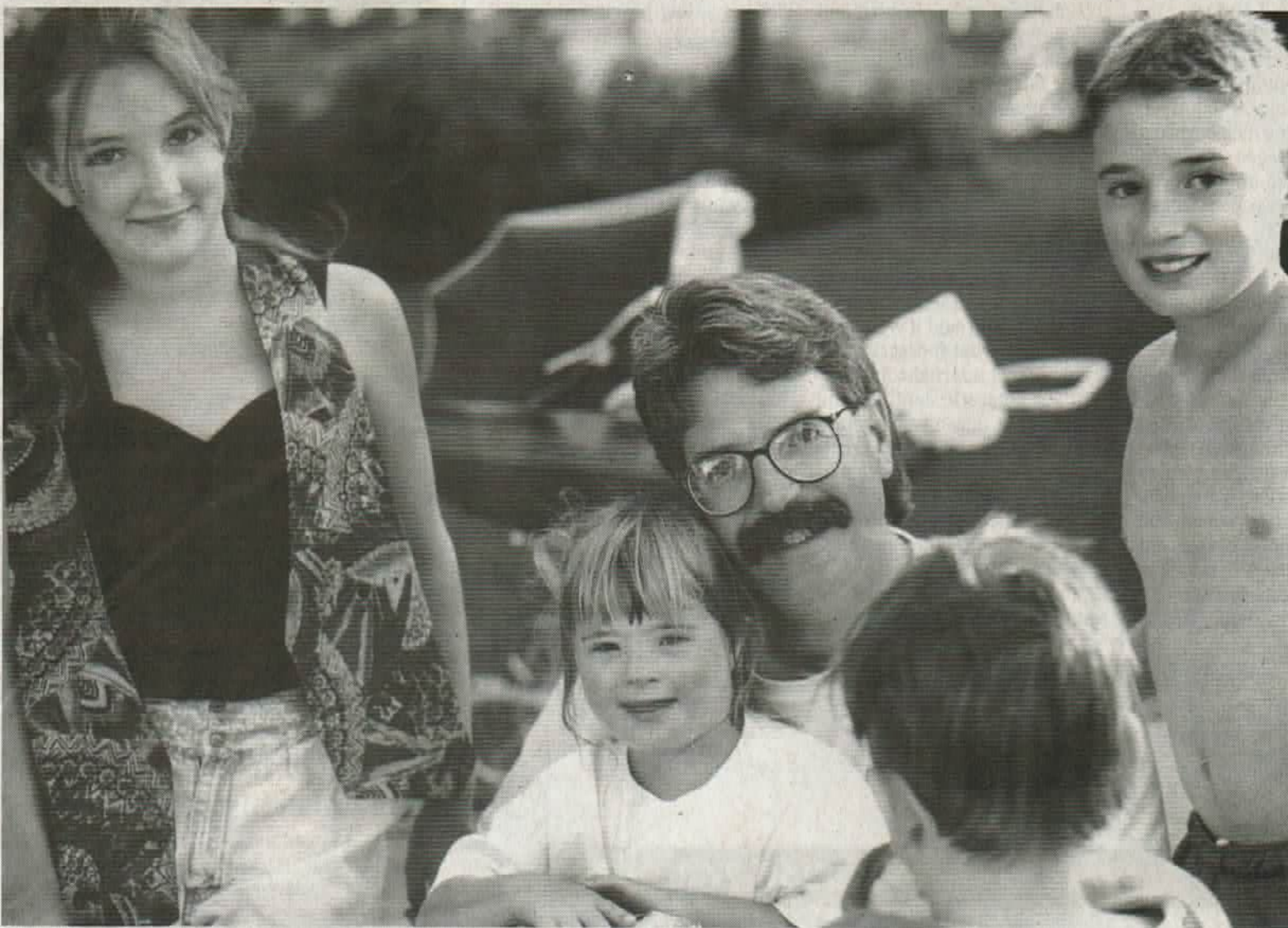


OPINION

The Okanagan Sunday, June 13, 2010



Contributed photo

The author's husband, Jack Acres, with children Jenner, Emma, Duncan, Jarrod and Noel (in baby carriage).

What makes a great father?

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As we approach Fathers' Day, let's reflect on the role of fathers in our society.

What makes a good or great father is somewhat subjective, of course.

Some may not have a father or a father figure or maybe have had a bad experience with their father, all of which is unfortunately part of life.

It is also one of the only jobs that comes with little or no training.

In our society, most fathers are the male that helped create the child, but not always.

We all have different ideals of what the perfect father would be, but safety, security and nurturing are probably some of the top attributes. I have had the honour of being brought up by the best father in the world and also of being married to one.

When our child with a developmental challenge was born almost 22 years ago, my husband (aka her father) accepted her with the same enthusiasm he had all the others. He was excited that we had a new baby girl to add to our gaggle of children and hardly skipped a beat when they told us she had Down syndrome.

I think Emma was lucky, as some parents are not as accepting when one is told their child has a challenge or disability.

I grew up being told that I would marry someone similar to my father. My dad was and is a remarkable person, a loving husband and an incredible father.

My mom was ill when I grew up, so I was able to spend a lot of time with my dad and grandfather, hiking, walking, playing tennis, enjoying life outside of work and school time.

I have fond memories of my dad horsing around with my sister and I, playing hide and seek, teaching us to climb a tree properly, to read and explore the world of imagination.

He taught us how to have table manners, how to show a dog you loved it by putting peanut butter on the roof of its mouth. Important things, such as how to make the perfect mud pie and drive my toy trucks through the mud hills.

I loved to drive from an early age, and so he would take me out to the UBC parking lot on weekends and let me drive to my heart's content.

He taught us that all things (inclusive of people) are created equally and how that impacts one's respect for others. He taught us how to live within nature being only one small part of it; then to respect it. He taught us the birds and the bees and circle of life by watching how kittens are born and watching a caterpillar I befriended morph into a butterfly.

After time dedicated to our studies and sports, the rewards were camping and exploring, learning, growing, laughing, enjoying the feel of wind and sun on your



ALLISON
MCNEILL

Whose Challenge Is It Anyway?

face on the ferry.

I grew up feeling safe and such incredible love for this man. I felt the world nor any evil could harm me because I had someone to protect me, and I was the recipient of unquestionable love.

The poor man I was going to marry would have to have these qualities in order to be a good husband and great father.

This was the backdrop I compared any potential suitor to. Not only would he have to like my father (and my father him), but my future husband would have to become the best father possible.

Funnily enough, he did not have to become anything because those qualities were already living inside my husband when I met him. They were just waiting to come out.

He was without a doubt the best father to our children that even I could imagine.

Having a daughter with Down syndrome did not mean to either of us that she would not have the same opportunities as all of her siblings.

We were lucky to be able to ski, have a pool, were into cycling and hiking with our dogs, and Emma went right along with us.

Although it may have taken a little longer to teach her how to ride her bike, to swim or ski, there she was, right along with us.

It never occurred to us and certainly not to her father that she would not be able to ever do anything she set her mind to. She was part of everything we did, from exercise to cooking to cleaning and raking leaves.

Our other children shared with Emma's upbringing and helped us teach her to walk, run, ride, swim, ski, cook and do yardwork as a team.

Both my father and husband were natural fathers, who I could trust to entertain, feed and sometimes even wipe the food off their little faces and hands without getting stressed out. In fact, they both welcomed the opportunity.

Sometimes, when our children were really little, my husband would decide that they should learn to read ASAP. So, after bath-time, they would climb up on his knee in his favourite chair to share the world that lay beyond the pages.

He would open up his favourite Sesame

Street dictionary and go over words again and again until the one or two year old could say them perfectly while giggling with glee at their success.

He would tell nighttime stories like The Legend of Goatman when we were on holiday to excite the kids' imaginations. When one of them really was afraid, he would lay down with them, making them feel safe, loved and protected until they drifted off to sleep. Then he would tiptoe back, smiling, to where the grownups were chatting or singing.

The honour of being a father is not given lightly, and I pray that it is not taken lightly.

It is a huge responsibility and, when done well, the outcomes are as incredible as our children are. When friends or neighbours complimented how well-behaved, polite or hard working our children were, Jack felt his heart soar with pride.

He was quite simply a wonderful father.

That is not to say our children got everything they asked for. They had to work hard and were rewarded in non-monetary fashion. They were all given unconditional love as well as discipline, albeit mostly by me.

Their father (who I would refer to as Uncle Jack at such times) knew that rules and consequences were necessary; he just preferred not to do it. He would agree with mean, old Mum, called affectionately Camp Alli.

Many people are able to choose when they have children, we were not. I have been pregnant on every birth-control device known to mankind and have several examples of how, even when used properly, babies sometimes come along.

We used to wonder how many children we would have had if we did not use anything, and were delighted when they all were born even when we had little money to spare.

Every time I told him we were pregnant - again - Jack was gracious and took part in the pregnancy, usually gaining more weight than me.

Somehow, we got through the early years. And when I look back at the firsts, it is with fondness. All the firsts . . . first baby, first son, first daughter, first child with a challenge and the first time to have a last baby.

We would not have changed a thing.

I will never forget the first time I saw my husband hold all of our babies, how he kissed them and welcomed them to our world and family.

These are all such incredibly important events and the beginning of our becoming parents and him the best father.

Happy Fathers' Day to all of you remarkable dads trying as hard as you can to be the best father you can be.

Allison McNeill is mum to four children and step-mum to two, one of whom has a developmental disability. She is proprietor of McNeill Communications. Email: info@misscommunications.com