

A real-life Mary Poppins

My mom will graduate with her master's degree in nursing education from Notre Dame of Maryland University on Saturday, May 26. I can barely remember a time when my mom was not also a college student on top of being a full-time nurse, running a meticulously organized household, and looking after children, many of whom were not or are not my brother or me. Friends and family joke that she must not sleep, which sadly is often the case. Still, my mom manages to get everything done the right way, just in time, and with a smile. She's like Mary Poppins, only better.

So, for her graduation present, I took my mom to see "Mary Poppins" at the Hippodrome. After a relaxing and delicious dinner at Sabatino's with everyone's favorite waitress, Peachy Dixon, we settled in to watch the live theatrical version of one of our favorite movies. We were immediately whisked away to London in 1910 where breathtaking sets seemed to come alive on the stage. The world of stoic father George Banks was drab and gray, especially compared to Mary's Technicolor universe. Mary doesn't allow herself or anyone else the opportunity to be bored or melancholy. She instantly detects the need for joy in the Banks children's lives and transports Jane and Michael - and their terrible moods - to lighter places. As the actors danced jubilantly across the stage in unexpected neon frocks and suits in an elaborate candy store, I realized that's what life with my mom is like.

My mom only wants to see people happy. She can put problems into real perspective and point out the positive in any situation. If that doesn't cheer you up, she'll do something silly or ridiculous to make you forget why you were upset in the first place. When I was 15 and couldn't attend homecoming because tickets sold out, I was devastated. So, my mom took me to Friendly's to get an ice cream. I cried until my Reese's Pieces Sundae was a mix of melted cookie dough ice cream and salty tears. When we left, she parked in every available parking spot in the Friendly's lot (I'd estimate it to be about 20 spots) until I was laughing uncontrollably.

Mary solves problem after problem for the Banks family. The clumsy butler nearly

annihilates the kitchen just moments before guests were to arrive for tea. A snap of the fingers, a song, and a little effort on the part of Jane and Michael, and the kitchen was spotless. Not only was this a means to help poor Mrs. Banks, but a method of teaching the children that work can be fun.

When my brother and I were little, our mom made picking up our toys a contest, playing to our competitiveness. Our playroom was clean in no time. Ask any nurse who's been lucky enough to work beside her at Mercy Medical Center over the past 25-plus years, and you'd find that my mom even finds ways to make caring for the sick an enjoyable experience. She'll play practical jokes on her friends and go out of her way to bring a smile to the faces of her patients and their families. In fact, she won a Daisy award for her commitment to patient care after providing one of the families with a Thanksgiving feast while their loved one was recovering from surgery during the holiday. Like Mary says, "A spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down."

The most important thing about Mary Poppins, however, is her way with children. Mary senses what they truly need and delivers it to them. Dance lessons? That's what chimney sweeps are for. A lesson in empathy? Let's go visit the bird lady. Michael will give up his two pence on his own after hearing her sing that doleful tune. Time with their father? Just leave this kite on Mr. Banks' desk. He'll be reminded of his own childhood and want to relive it with Jane and Michael.

I must have inherited my love for and understanding of children from my mother. Though she's not a pediatric nurse, my mom has cared for numerous children over the years. My brother and I, our cousins, neighborhood kids (including one who had cancer at 9 months of age), and now, my son, have all had the pleasure of having our own real-life Mary Poppins to make magic out of every-day life. No matter how busy she was with school, work, and maintaining order around the house, my mom always had time for fun. She never hesitated to get on the floor with us to build towers of blocks, or to dine at our Play-Doh restaurant, or to help manage my Barbie fashion show one minute and assist my brother and his Ninja Turtles in crashing (often literally) the Malibu poolside after-party. Most importantly, she would read to us. Childhood experts disagree on many things, but one belief they all share is that children learn through play. Mary Poppins and my mom would certainly agree.

All children need at least one adult in their lives who is willing to see the world as they do, to find fun in the mundane, to validate their worries, and quickly replace tears with giggles. Believe it or not, adults have the same needs. We have what it takes to enjoy life within ourselves. So, come on...what are you afraid of? Channel your inner Mary Poppins. Got it? Okay, now let's go fly a kite!