

Lifelong Hero

Without pictures, I don't remember his face before he had cancer. It was not until I realized he would not live forever that I absorbed every detail about him. The man responsible for my mother's birth and in turn responsible for mine. I am talking about my grandfather, Chuck Jorgenson.

A man who wanted nothing more than to be a loving father. He accomplished this by having seven children, all of whom grew up in a three bedroom farm house waking up every morning and doing their chores. Chuck was not much for discipline, but he always had a way to make sure everyone got things done. He pressed the importance of an education and made sure all seven of his children graduated high school, four of whom went to college.

This was not what made him my hero when I was a child. Most summers, I was able to talk my parents into letting me stay at my grandparents for a couple months. This is where I learned that Chuck Jorgenson was invincible. I would wake up early in the morning and help him milk the cows and do some chores, but I would always watch him. Tossing hay bales around like they were pillows. It seemed as if he could never tire.

So, in his size, strength, and stamina, I saw my hero, watching him carry things my uncles could not even lift off the ground. When two of my uncles were trying to lift a slaughtered cow up by a pulley, they could barely get the back end up off the ground. I remember laughing as a child when my grandpa walked over and put one hand between where my uncles were pulling, and up went the cow. His hands were enormous, the size of a bear's. We would always play mercy, and he would let me feel good about myself winning for 10 or so seconds before he would squeeze his fingers together and bring me to my knees.

I remember a story that my mother told me, though I don't recall what question brought it about. Chuck was out cutting down some old trees for fire wood out in the back forty by himself one day. The sky must have dropped three inches of snow that day alone. While he was cutting a tree trunk into sections, he hit a knot in the tree, and the chainsaw came back and cut his face open. He put his handkerchief over the side of his face and walked a good distance to the house. When he was in the hospital, he received over one hundred stitches to repair his face. He didn't ask if he was going to be all right or if there were going to be any side effects. He was too busy telling the doctor to do a good job because he did not want to look like a monster to his grandchildren. He was more afraid of scaring us than if he was going to be okay.

When I found out Chuck had cancer, I thought nothing of it and that he would beat it. After all, he was my superman, and until later I did not realize that the cancer was to be his kryptonite. All those years of smoking, working in paper mills, and other factories when the farm wasn't doing too well caught up to him. So when the doctors gave him only six months to live, I was crushed under the big rock of hatred. I was mad that god would take such a good and honest person. My hatred faltered, and my hopes arose when my grandpa surpassed the six month mark and kept his hair through five months of chemotherapy.

Two years after he was diagnosed with cancer, it finally got the best of him. On December 22, 1998 he passed away at the Tomah hospice house. All of my relatives were there except me. I had told my mom I would take my two little sisters to their Christmas recital. When I returned home, I heard the bad news from my parents, though I did not cry and was without emotion for a while. He passed away while my two little angels I call sisters were singing their Christmas carols. Maybe I took comfort in knowing that he followed their beautiful voices to heaven.

Chuck Jorgenson was buried on Christmas Eve which was hard on all of us. But I will never forget how many lives he has touched and how he has changed mine. At church while everyone was paying their respects I took a look around and was astonished. Wall to wall people, they filled every pew and stood in the aisles. More than you will see at any Sunday mass. I realized that Chuck had lived more in 65 years than anyone could in 200. I told myself that if I could have half the amount of people at my funeral knowing that I touched that many lives, I would die a happy man. There is an old country song called "In Daddy's Eyes" that was played at the funeral. There was not a dry eye in sight including my own because the song fit him so well. That song will always remind me of him and the eighteen years I was able to spend getting to know my hero, Chuck Jorgenson.

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