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Daughters reflect on how their dads helped develop their confidence, business acumen

By Kristin Samuelson, Chicago Tribune reporter

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At 4:30 a.m., six days a week, pipe fitter Joe Czochanski would pull his daughter Joan out of bed and ask her what she wanted to learn and accomplish that day. During the winter, he would plop her next to a heating vent on the cold kitchen floor for a half-hour conversation before he would leave for work.

And when Joan's Polish immigrant dad returned home, she would recap how productive she had been that day.

"His deal was unlimited time. My deal was unending effort," recalled Joan Walker, now executive vice president of corporate relations at Allstate Insurance Co. in Northbrook. She said she never resented him for disrupting her sleep.

"I felt like I was the most special person in the world just to be alone with him and hear his dreams, his aspirations for the family."

Like many women who have climbed the corporate ladder, Walker credits her late father for being "gender blind" and teaching her about goal setting and accountability, and encouraging her to try her hand at things she might not have considered, such as taking science classes and playing sports.

"What a powerful difference playing competitive sports makes later on in your career," said Walker, 65, the eldest of six children. Whether it is in the classroom or the workplace, "there is a greater level of comfort ... to speak up and not be intimidated," Walker said.

Diane Grimard Wilson, an Oak Park-based private practice career coach and psychotherapist, said a young girl's positive relationship with her father "tends to foster better relationships in the workplace and with authoritative figures."

Phillip Elbaum, a licensed clinical social worker in Deerfield and assistant professor of psychiatry at Loyola University Chicago's Stritch School of Medicine, said a father's encouragement is a key to his daughter's success. "In the situation where the young woman growing up sees the father as supportive ... when she grows up in the work world, she can think she has as many opportunities."

Julie Smolyansky

Julie Smolyansky, who became chief executive of Lifeway Foods Inc., a kefir-drink company, when her father died in 2002, said he seemed to provoke her into being aggressive, to stand her ground.

"No matter what I said or did, he wanted me to do or say the opposite, maybe to develop arguments," Smolyansky recalled. "He was psychologically tough. I developed a really strong skin because of it. I'd

love to ask him today, 'Was it because there was a glass ceiling? Because in order to have success for a woman, they needed to be better?'"

Though Smolyansky said she learned from her father's "workaholic" nature, it also kept her at arm's length while growing up. Their relationship changed as the company he founded in the mid-1980s gained traction and he had more free time.

"We went from more of a father-daughter relationship to a friendship where we could just talk, and our conversations got more interesting in terms of work," she said.

Melody Spann-Cooper

For Melody Spann-Cooper, her father taught her about responsibility, trust and discipline.

While growing up in the Auburn Gresham neighborhood on the South Side, she said she befriended the good kids, the riffraff and just about everyone in between. That support, even from a distance, shaped her.

"I've never known what it's like not to have a strong supporter in my corner," Wynne said. "Independent as I am, part of the reason is I know I have his and my mom's support."

And when he was home, she remembers her dad teaching her and her brother how to play chess, or holding spelling bees or reading the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy to them before bed, making sure to vary each of his character voices. Today, Wynne, 55, said she and her Naperville-based parents are good friends, and she finds their childhood teachings coming through at work.

"When I think about girls today, I always want to make sure they're having fun because learning doesn't have to be like school. It's just memorable moments of capturing knowledge, and making it fun makes you remember it. My dad was always an artist at that."

Wynne said her father never "dumbed down the message for a kid," which allowed her to equally take part in conversations with adults, and helped her interact with all ages as she matured. He also explained to her why he was scolding her so she'd learn from her mistakes.

"Trust me, there had to be a lot of explanations with me," Wynne said laughing.

Having served in management positions for Mobil Oil, and now leading International Management Consulting Associates, Michael Wynne is no stranger to leadership. He also serves as a coach for Boardroom Bound, which helps develop "next generation, diverse business leaders."

"He's a huge supporter of women getting on corporate boards," Wynne said of her father. "He knows that a corporation that is run at the top by a diversity of thinking and gender and race is really important."

Through her work with the Girl Scouts, Wynne said she sees many fathers taking an active role in their daughters' lives.

"There seems to be a surge in dads wanting to participate in girl scouting," Wynne said. "Dads want to be that special guy in their daughters' lives."

Her friendships reflected the philosophy of her father, Pervis "The Blues Man" Spann, legendary disc jockey at WVON-AM 1690, who taught her to embrace all people and to treat them equally. But in raising his four children with wife Lovie, he knew any one of them could get in with the wrong crowd.

"I was one of those teenagers. I could go good or I could go bad," Spann-Cooper, now married, said. "He's the reason I didn't go bad."

Saturday nights beginning when she 15 years old, Spann-Cooper was required to work at the radio station her dad owned. First he had her taking phone calls, then he asked her to host her own show between 10 p.m. and 1 a.m., playing music "kids wanted to hear." He even allowed her to bring friends to the station. The purpose, she said, was to prevent her from getting into "any debauchery."

"I didn't have one Saturday night off, even if it was Christmas," Spann-Cooper said. Until she was 19 and attending Loyola University she still had to find a way to host her show.

"It instilled discipline in me," said Spann-Cooper, 47, who credits her father, now 79 and battling early stages of Alzheimer's, with helping shape her. Today she is president and general manager of the station and chairman of Midway Broadcasting Corp., its parent company, in which she purchased a controlling interest in 1999.

"I think I am the kind of person I am because I had a man who loved me," she said. "Your first love is your dad. He is the first person to show a woman love and from there, you know how the world is supposed to love you."

Susan Credle

Susan Credle, chief creative officer for Chicago advertising agency Leo Burnett, said she rarely spent time with her father, a doctor, as a child. But her story illustrates it's never too late to develop a loving and important relationship.

"(My dad) always said, 'The patient is first, above anything,' and he meant above family," Credle said. "When the phone rang, he was off. I remember sometimes wishing I could be dad's patient."

Her father's busy work schedule, coupled with her parents divorcing when she was about 5, meant Credle saw her father only "a couple weeks during the summer and a couple times during the year."

Credle's relationship with her father changed when she entered her early 30s. She had moved to New York to pursue her advertising career, and when her father, Dr. Wesley Fowler, came to visit, she took him out for martinis to hash out differences that had been "swept under the rug."

"I said, 'I think we gotta come clean on some stuff. I think you maybe carry around guilt or frustration with me, and I have them too. Why don't we get it off our chests?'" Credle said. "We created this really safe zone, and the martinis really helped too. We sat there for hours, and I asked, 'Why did you do this? Why did you do that?' And by the end we were good to go, 'OK, next decade.'"

From that heart-to-heart talk, Credle and her father bonded. And that bond grew as both advanced in their careers. Her father, a doctor of obstetrics and gynecology and gynecologic oncology at the University of North Carolina Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center, began traveling and giving talks.

Today she describes her 72-year-old father, who recently retired, as a "precious, interesting and intelligent man," and said he provides advice on almost any subject she throws at him. In turn, he comes to her for help with social media in his new role as head of the alumni association for the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Medicine.

Debra Cafaro

Debra Cafaro said her first-generation Italian-American father, Frank Cafaro, a mailman, supported her by telling her she had no limits in life.

When his teenage daughter decided she wanted to pursue a career in law, he exposed her to the field in the only way he knew how.

"He took time off from work to give me a chance to see a great lawyer in action on the theory that, if I could see it, I could be it," said Cafaro, 54, chief executive of Chicago-based real estate investment trust Ventas Inc. "It was very special and uncommon for a dad in that time to take my 16-year-old aspirations so seriously and act on them. It was rare and made a big impact on me."

When she wanted to take piano lessons, her father also made it happen, and "he was able to write my first semester tuition check to Notre Dame from his success at his second career of being a professional coin dealer and entrepreneur," Cafaro said of her father, now 84.

"My dad never put me down," Cafaro said, and never made her do traditional female chores such as babysitting or cleaning house. "It was OK for me to be what we called a 'tomboy' in those days and to be a big reader, both of which were outside the norm. In those days, for someone of my dad's socioeconomic background, that was extraordinary."

Maria Wynne

Like most teenagers, Maria Wynne experienced a sometimes-rocky relationship with her mother. During that time, which was in the 1970s, her father, Michael Wynne, a professor of business who often traveled, would send handwritten letters to Maria every week reminding her that her relationship with her mother would eventually heal.

"As a kid, to get a letter addressed directly to you, that's a big deal," said Wynne, now chief executive of the Girl Scouts of Greater Chicago and Northwest Indiana, who still re-reads her father's letters. "There was a lot of wisdom in those letters. He'd write, 'Be good to your mother; one day you'll be really good friends.'"