



Life Actually

By Kari Kampakis

Making Memories

Several years ago, I asked my oldest daughter—five at the time—to name her best memories. Without pause she said, “The day I was born, Disneyworld and making chocolate strawberries with Miss Melissa.”

Wait a minute...what? I understood Ella’s first two answers, but the third one stumped me. Obviously, she didn’t remember her actual birth day, but she realized its significance. And Disneyworld—well, that goes without saying. But it’d been almost a year since Ella visited her friend Dewitt’s house and made chocolate-covered strawberries with his mom for Valentine’s. And until now, she’d never mentioned it.

I’d forgotten all about that day. How could it be a top-three memory?

To this day, that story reminds me that a happy childhood can’t be orchestrated. As a planner, I’d like to map it out, and like many parents I readily fork out money on birthday parties, plays, concerts and other concrete events I think might make a positive, lasting impression. Every so often, however, I have to remind myself that kids are creative enough to entertain themselves. They don’t need tickets, plans or money to have fun. Chances are, the spontaneous free play that happens at home will sustain longer value in their memory banks than any off-site experience.

It’s an old-fashioned mindset that seems to be making a comeback in today’s economy, where every dollar counts.

I have a dear friend—also my neighbor—named Mary Carson who I’ve always admired for her ability to keep things simple. She *truly* enjoys the moment, takes time to stop and smell the gardenias. I mean this literally...shortly after she moved in, I saw her with her daughter near the bushes in my front yard. “I hope you don’t mind,” she said, “but Annie and I wanted to smell your gardenias.” With a blush I replied, “I didn’t even know I had gardenias!”

I find Mary Carson unique in the way she incorporates many wholesome joys from our childhood in Annie’s life. Annie comes over talking about things I haven’t thought about in forever—Shrinky Dinks, Raggedy Ann, “Little House on the Prairie,” “The Secret Garden”—and it always makes me smile. It’s so refreshing, stepping back in time like that.

I was at Mary Carson’s house one day with some other neighbors and kids. A child started a pillow fight, and suddenly six little bodies were taking shots at each other. The kids were having a blast, of course, but all I could think about was

reining in my wild bucks. Before I could stop them, Mary Carson turned to me and grinned.

“Isn’t this great?” she beamed. “We’re making memories!”

I stopped and stared at her. She was right; we *were* making memories. I just never thought of it that way.

Writing this column, I had to reflect on my childhood. *What are my best memories?* I asked. My dilapidated mommy brain pulled some crazy things from the hat. After all these years, the things that stuck are random, uneventful flashbacks with no rhyme or reason. On the surface they seem meaningless, but somehow, they shaped who I am.

Here’s a wild sampling:

*Reenacting *The Brady Bunch* and *Grease* with my sister and making her play Marcia and Danny Zuko because I was older and made the rules;

*Rolling up Mom’s pink Oriental rug to practice moonwalking in white socks on the hardwoods;

*Watching my big brother and his cute friends, all of whom I had crushes on, play basketball in our driveway and then crowd into the kitchen to eat;

*Counting coins from a big glass jar with my father;

*Giddily anticipating the grand opening of Tuscaloosa’s University Mall with my sisters and picking out what we’d wear the night before;

*Learning to French braid on a big Barbie head;

*Bursting into Pizza Hut with my gregarious family of seven and feeling all eyes on us and we pulled together tables and took the place by storm;

*Feeling my mom’s hands wake me up before school; hearing her ask if I wanted French toast or scrambled eggs for breakfast; knowing this meant I was loved.

If you haven’t already, I challenge you to dig into your childhood, connect the dots between now and then. Are your best memories arbitrary like mine? Would your parents have any recollection of them?

It is amazing what kids teach us. I’d known all my life about the magic of the circus, Disneyworld, Disney on Ice, but it wasn’t until a five-year-old pointed it out that I realized magic is just as likely to exist in chocolate and strawberries.

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