

Growing Up In Gaithersburg

By Marien Helz



Gardening

“Do something constructive!” was the command I can still hear my father issuing.

One of the reasons that my father wanted to move to a small town in the 1940's, I am convinced, is that he could keep his children on a much shorter leash than he could elsewhere. For example, there were very few children who walked to school when I was growing up in Gaithersburg. People had started driving everywhere. We had to walk—not only to school, but to church, to the store, anywhere we were going. Our television was monitored, and our bedtime was earlier than that of any children we knew. Keeping tabs so close was much easier where there were fewer other influences.

Even given the small town values, my father was determined to bring us up quite differently from those around us. Most people in Maryland understand that summers are hot, and hot weather means taking it easy while it's oppressive. He was from Wisconsin, and the same drive that made him become a highly regarded physicist made him refuse to be intimidated by the heat, and made him even more determined not to allow his children to be lazy with heat as an excuse.

Half of the large lot on the side of our property, behind a grape arbor, was a vegetable garden. On Monday through Friday we were instructed to weed the garden. We were to be up by 8:00am and were not to stop before noon.

I considered that to be an exotic form of torture; since the afternoons were hotter, we were not expected to work then, but the neighborhood kids all played in the morning and stayed inside in the afternoon, so we didn't get to play when they did. With my mother as Warden, however, we were always in the garden by the designated time. Early in the morning, the dew was still on the leaves and would get on our legs and turn the ground to mud. I wonder how many people have experienced the obnoxious feeling of mud and dew from their knees to their ankles. I still remember the sensation.



Later in the morning, it was generally insufferably hot. Although our garden was very large, it wasn't large enough to really occupy three reasonably competent children four hours a day, five days a week for six to eight weeks during the summer. We, therefore, would collect under the pin oak tree at the edge of the neighbor's yard with one of us designated to keep watch for the Warden who sporadically checked on our progress.

One day, my brother—the eldest by fifteen months—decided that we should take turns weeding with one of us at a time working while the other two lolled under the oak. Since it was very hot, we felt that an umbrella would be very nice as shade from the sun for the one who was weeding. My brother managed to sneak into the house, get the umbrella, and get out again without being caught.

Once noon came, we were called to lunch, and the Warden turned back into our reasonably laid back mother.

My father's insistence on our working in the garden, and on our walking rather than being driven places up to a mile and a half away, and on such things as limited TV had the effect of setting us apart from other children. We were the only kids who had to walk home for lunch, so while the others were on the playground after lunch bonding with each other, we were walking the fifteen minutes home and fifteen minutes back to school. Gaithersburg was a town, such as neo-traditional communities are now designed to be, where one could walk everywhere, yet walking had not become fashionable except to my father. The general attitude was that if you weren't driven to school or didn't take the bus, you were deprived.



Many would consider my father wrong to have been so demanding—certainly those who believe in supporting whatever their children want to do would think so. In looking at my father's style of parenthood, one would substitute the word demanding for supportive. All three of his children, however, hold earned doctorates. We have been able to contribute to what we each value most—medicine, the arts, and environmental science. The geo-chemist has been able to study the ecology of the Chesapeake Bay and lead graduate students in developing ways to conserve, protect, and reverse pollution damage to it. Perhaps that's the highest reward—to spend one's life safeguarding the homeland one loves.



If I gained—on those insufferably hot summer days in the garden with sun pounding down on my head and mud under my fingernails, on my knees and ankles—the ability to keep going when fate pounds one on the head as it inevitably does, if I gained the determination there in the garden to weed one row at a time until the garden was perfect, in whatever garden of life I found myself, then being made to toil in the garden was a gift.