A Five Star Childhood

People love Shakespeare Engraving on Yelp.

“Couldn’t be happier with the end result of my trophies and engraving!”

“Roger is so helpful, cheerful and clearly loves what he does.”

“This place rocks!”

Yelp is right. This place does deserve 5 stars. Then again, I might be a little biased: this Roger guy is my dad.

*****

Shakespeare Engraving sits on a block where a hodgepodge of needs and wants come to frolic. There’s a nail salon, a hair salon, an optical shop, a car repair shop. This is a block where you can get a makeover, fix your astigmatism, tint your car windows, and buy an Oscar replica all in a day’s work.

My dad moved to Wilshire Boulevard twenty-two years ago and found that he fit right in. He would talk shop with his neighbor, Eddie, in the parking lot and exchange Christmas gifts with Monica, the tailor. And occasionally, rabbis from the local Chabad would come by and lead him through a prayer.

Then, I was born. And it was here, at Shakespeare Engraving, where I grew up.

It was here where I first crawled and walked. It was here why I played “peek-a-boo” in my Fold-N-Go and “office” in my tee pee. It was here where I agonized over geometry homework and practiced “Hot Cross Buns” on my cello. It was here where I triple-edited my UC Statement and opened some of my first college acceptance emails.
The walls of Shakespeare Engraving have seen a life in progress. And its doors have welcomed many different people in search of the same thing: something gold or silver or bronze with which to recognize or honor or remember someone else.

One regular was Trina, a bubbly fifty-something who had the sassiest style and the greatest shoes. My parents have pictures of me, in my diaper, posing in Trina’s sparkly heels and wide-rimmed turquoise sunglasses.

Trina moved with such poise. When my dad answered her knock at the door, Trina wouldn’t just walk in, she would float. Imagine Julie Andrews’s character in Princess Diaries and then double it and give Queen Clarisse strawberry blonde hair. That was Trina. She moved like she was the monarch of her space bubble.

When she spoke, she entranced. Her melodic Southern accent could tame any little girl’s wildest fears. Everything about her presence was tranquil and therapeutic. I remember she would ask me about school and orchestra and karate and she would play with her chunky necklaces as she smiled and nodded at my responses, genuinely intrigued by my musings.

Funny enough, Trina was also the president of the alumni association of my future high school. Little did I know that years down the line she would help me, a budding writer, get one of my articles published in the alumni association’s quarterly magazine. Trina was, in a sense, my fairy godmother.

I remember whenever she left after a visit, the smell of her sweet perfume would linger for a while in the hot summer air that concentrated at the front of the shop, and I always remember thinking, “I wonder what shoes Ms. Trina will be wearing next time.”

I still see Trina sometimes. The topics of conversation are the same: college, future plans, what I’m writing. And I still look on her with the same admiration. Trina taught me how to be a
woman. She taught me how to be kind, how to be regal, and how to walk with confidence in the fanciest of footwear.

*****

Another regular customer of my dad’s was Will. Will had the most booming, attention-grabbing voice. Whenever he knocked at the shop’s back door (rarely did he ever use the front door), he announced himself like the town crier. But, we had to forgive him; he was a basketball coach.

“Roger the Dodger!” Will would exclaim as my dad greeted him at the door. Then, with a few long, determined strides, Will would saunter in like he owned the place or at least like he had some stockholdings.

Of course, the first topic of conversation for Will and my dad was always basketball. To this day, my dad is a huge fan of the UCLA Bruins, and I remember he and Will would talk about the latest game like they could go back in time, figure out everything that had gone wrong with every play, and retroactively change the score so that their team could come out the winner. I always thought my dad pretended to know more about shooting hoops than he actually did (he was a cross country and track star in high school and couldn’t palm a basketball for his life), but the conversations he had with Will seemed fulfilling to both parties, so I assumed his knowledge was adequate enough. The language Will and my dad spoke during these passionate conversations was a foreign one to me. Nevertheless, I sat there and listened and giggled and was captivated.

From the first time I met Will, at age two, he intrigued me. He was the tallest and darkest man I had ever met in my two years on Earth. Looking up at Will from my humble perch was intimidating, but he wasn’t. He was incredibly animated, warm, and chipper.
My parents recall that during one of Will’s first visits to the shop, with no shame, I walked up to him and touched his leg. I gazed with the greatest curiosity at his shin and examined the stark difference between the skin on my hand and the skin on his leg. Noticing my light touch, Will gazed down and exclaimed in his sing-songy voice, “I bet you’ve never touched a black leg before. I bet you thought I was a tree!”

Will was a great sport about everything.

If my dad made a spelling mistake on a nameplate or needed a couple hours more to fill an order, Will was understanding and patient. He wasn’t demanding and he never argued over prices. He was always ready for conversation. Bad energy wasn’t his thing. He was one emotionally stable guy and I wanted to emulate him.

Will definitely taught me how to wear my heart on my sleeve. Why not radiate happiness when it can spread like wildfire? This became my philosophy. Just like Will, I would be unapologetically upbeat.

*****

Once a year, my mom will have one of those days that every mom has when she gets a little too reflective and proclaims herself a “terrible mother.” She’ll explain by saying that she wishes that she and my dad wouldn’t have been so overprotective. She’ll say I should have been allowed to go to sleep-away camp and to date in high school and to go to parties and be out late. These would have been “character-building” activities, she’ll say.

At the time, I would have wanted nothing more than for this to be her philosophy. But in retrospect, I’m glad I was protected and advised the way I was.

Most of my peers who went to AstroCamp in elementary school and who partied in middle school and who went to Coachella in high school peaked before college. And they did not
grow up to be particularly nice or interesting people. They were just sort of there, going through the motions, living life in the fast lane, and graduating with a prescription drug problem and a therapist on speed dial.

Because I spent nearly all of my time—afternoons after school, holiday breaks, and the weekends—at the shop, in the company of my parents, it was practically guaranteed that I would not become one of these people my parents were trying so hard to keep me from becoming. In fact, I was always the complete opposite of whatever my school chums were.

Thanks to my parents, I was the kid at Disneyland who bought an autograph book, had a couple of princesses and Cruella de Vil sign it, and then proceeded to ask the woman at the AAA booth to put her John Hancock in it. I was the kid who had an easier time mingling with the adults at the annual Passover party than shooting the breeze with my fellow seven-year-olds. Even at my friend group’s White Elephant gift exchange every December, I still find myself spending most of my time in the kitchen talking to the host’s parents, transfixed by their stories about their younger daughter’s AYSO team and about particularly heated PTA meetings. I feel like I should just start my Tupperware collection now and invest in some mom jeans.

****

Life at the shop meant I was also exposed to my dad’s inside jokes with his customers. Because of my dad’s ability to get just about anyone to laugh with him, I developed a love for humor. It should also be noted that I grew up watching sitcoms. “Seinfeld,” “Friends,” and “Frasier” were on a constant loop in our household.

Because I loved to laugh and because my dad enjoyed making people laugh, naturally, I wanted to see if I had some shtick too. And I still remember the day I realized that I did.
A member of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)—who would come in once a month to get nameplates for her new employees—was making her monthly visit. She entered the shop and found my stuffed turtle sitting on the carpet. As she approached it, I commanded: “Step away from the turtle.”

Now normally, addressing an FBI agent like this would lead to an abrupt arrest and thorough questioning. But, I was a five-year-old curly haired redhead in overalls; I wasn’t exactly on the FBI’s Most Wanted list. The agent stood still for a moment before erupting into laughter and my parents, after gauging her reaction, quickly followed suit.

I remember being proud of my performance that day. This turtle bit was my shot at being funny and it elicited the right response. After that, I made it my mission to make humor a part of my daily interactions. Soon enough, my wittiness crossed over into my writing. I was dropping light-hearted one-liners into my eighth grade book reports and my tenth grade PowerPoint presentations were a breath of fresh air for my teachers.

Peer reviews were always rough, though. Most of the jokes I sprinkled into my papers went right over my classmates’ heads. Not to mention, no one else’s writing had any pizzazz so I was stuck reading and critiquing the same robotic essay about *The Grapes of Wrath* that I had read on SparkNotes. There were a lot of red pen marks, let’s just put it that way.

Luckily, when I turned in my paper, I would get a guffaw or two out of my teacher and an A. And that was good enough for me.

*****

When I’m not writing or comparing parenting notes with my friends’ parents, I’m usually acting *in loco parentes* (Latin for “in place of parents”). I am the one who steers clear of the
party culture, despises the hookup scene, and gets everyone home before midnight in one piece (You’re welcome parents/guardians!). I’m the designated hair-holder, the one who dishes out boy advice (and condoms), the one with extra Band-Aids and Wet Ones and Kotex within easy reach. My friends have been known to call me “Mom” and I’ve occasionally graduated to “Grandma.” And of course, for these reasons, it came as no surprise to my parents that I wanted to apply to be a Resident Assistant (RA) for my sophomore year of college.

I received the position—though it is very difficult to land the job as a sophomore—and I have served in this capacity ever since. I was once up until 6:00 a.m. with a resident who was vomiting over a trashcan. I have been the first to respond to cases of sexual assault and harassment. I’ve shut down the occasional dorm room party (always impressed by the amount of first-years that can squeeze into the shoe boxes they call rooms in the residence halls), and I’ve confiscated a bong or two.

Essentially, as an RA, I feel like I’m twenty-one and forty-five at the same time. I’m expected to be a peer and a parent. Really, I owe my ability to succeed in this role to my parents. If I hadn’t spent so much time with them learning the parenting craft at Shakespeare Engraving, I would probably have been the resident throwing up over the trashcan at 6:00 a.m., the host of that dorm party, the owner of the bong.

*****

Yelpers! Shakespeare Engraving is out of this world! A quaint family business that offers same-day service and hard-to-beat prices.
It was by far the best place to grow up! Just like you are able to choose which figurines, columns, and bases to build your trophy with here, I was able to build my ideal self, picking and choosing from all the personalities that found their way into this little trophy shop on Wilshire Boulevard. Need a trophy, plaque, or nameplate? Need it today? My dad is your guy.

Hours: Mon.-Fri. 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m.

Parking: Street parking

$: Priceless