

THE UN-COMFORT ZONE

With Robert Wilson



Good Habit - Questionable Motive

I would like to share with you a story about my mom, a woman who was very insecure about her background. She grew up in a blue collar family where neither her mother nor father finished eighth grade. Mom completed high school, but only with tutoring by my father. She would frequently say to me, "I was born on the wrong side of the tracks."

At age 19, she married my father, the handsome son from a wealthy family. Her beauty and charm trumped all the debutantes in town, and swept Dad off his feet. She thought she had it made and that all her fears would go away. Money and position, however, would not erase her feelings of inferiority. Those feelings were intensified instead. The contrast between her education and her in-laws with professional degrees was intimidating.

Mom wanted to fit in, join the discussions, be an authority in her own right. In short, she wanted to feel important in her new family, and she realized that she needed more knowledge. Determined to find a way to reduce her education deficit, Mom threw herself into reading.

Any subject appealed to her at first, and over time she found her favorites and pursued them to excellence. One thing she had no time for was fiction.

It was a habit that served her well, and in 1960 paid off in a big way. That year my dad was diagnosed with kidney failure and given less than a year to live. There was no cure, and my parents were advised to start planning for the day he would die.

Three years old at the time, my recollections are that my strong Daddy could no longer pick me up and carry me. That he did not go to work very often, and spent his days in bed. I noticed Mom took over all the driving and occasionally

pulled off the road so Dad could vomit.

Mom and Dad sold their house and used the proceeds to buy a four-unit apartment house with the plan that Mom, my sister and I would live in one unit and live off the rents of the other three. The plan was for my mother to work part time until my sister and I were old enough for school, then she would work full time. Until Dad's illness, she had been a stay home Mom.

After high school, Mom trained as an x-ray technician, but had not worked in years. She began to take temp jobs to beef up her skills and to develop a network of potential employers when the inevitable day arrived.

At one of those early temp jobs, the x-ray machine broke. An extended period of down time ensued, and Mom went to the magazine rack in the doctor's lobby for something to read. She passed over the popular magazines of the day after finding an out of date medical journal. "This looks like something good for my mind!" she thought.

In an article about physicians in Boston conducting experimental surgery, she learned of the world's first kidney transplants. At the time of the writing, the doctors were looking for volunteers. Her pulse quickened. As she read on, she discovered there was a prerequisite. The volunteers had to have an identical twin.

Dad happened to have an identical twin.

At that point Mom ran to the nearest phone and dialed Boston until she got one of those doctors on the line. "Yes," he replied, "we are still looking for volunteers. Send me your husband and his brother." That night they went to visit my Uncle Ralph, who said, "To save your life, absolutely! Yes, you may have one of my kidneys."

I share this story because Mom developed a lifelong habit of reading non-fiction because she wanted to impress her in-laws and other people who intimidated her. In the end, her habit saved my dad's life. He became the 12th person in the world to have a kidney transplant and live. And, I got Dad for 18 more years.

My mom may have been motivated by her fears, but it is a fact of life that when you expose yourself to new things you will recognize opportunities that others will miss. So, pick up a book, take a class, or visit a new place and see what exciting things open up for you.

Robert Evans Wilson, Jr. is an author, speaker and humorist. He works with companies that want to be more competitive and with people who want to think like innovators. For more information on Robert, please visit www.jumpstartyourmeeting.com.