

My Life as Uncle Danny's Son

By Christopher Arellano – Dec 2004

It's so easy now to guess what happened to my father the day I was born 44 years ago.

He got sick and vomited.

Oh sure, he blames bad coffee at San Francisco's St. Luke's Hospital, where he drank while the doctors were delivering me. Agreed, I wasn't the cutest of babies. Inevitably, someone will make the predictable argument that I still have that sad effect on people.

But, looking back now, I playfully wonder if as a baby I could see my father vomit and it left a lifelong impression.

Since then, I've spent a lifetime glancing over my shoulder at my father, usually hoping I didn't make him vomit. He makes me proud. He makes me smile. He collects gratuitous compliments on birthday cards and modestly files them away. I've seen relatives turn to him for advice and several children are named after him.

You know him as your brother or the popular but somewhat reserved, Uncle Danny. I've listened to others tell me about him as a boy, young man, an esteemed uncle and the stories don't get old. He's my favorite subject and I am proud of him.

But I'd like to tell you about a feel-good story you haven't heard much about and that is my relationship with my father, everybody's Uncle Danny. Because after the checkmate is done, and the final jokes exchanged, it was the kid who lived with him and who he drove to school.

This is our story, the relationship of my father and I. It may be a story that my brothers and sisters would tell differently, but it should generally ring true.

Prom Night 1956

My father and mother were introduced by Uncle Raul, who attended Poly High School in San Francisco with my mother, Ramona Lopez. My mother sat next to Auntie Loretta, Loretta John, in homeroom. The Senior Prom at the Mark Hopkins Hotel was approaching and my mother broached the possibility of attending it with him.

"I said I already had a date," Uncle Raul said in a conversation that is entirely possible to imagine. "But my brother (Daniel) will take you."

My father, then 18, had joined the Marine Corps for a six-month active duty stint. He agreed to escort my mom to the Prom. Uncle Raul, Auntie Loretta and my parents double-dated. After the Prom, they went to a North Beach night club, Facts, and saw the Four Freshmen. They were even served alcohol.

Four years later, both couples were married. My mother gave birth to me in December 1960. My father vomited. Kennedy was elected president a month earlier. The Sixties could now begin in earnest.

At that time, my father was a postal driver and attending Cogswell College. He was still a Marine reservist, but his self-confidence was bolstered by some flattering attention by the Marines. His aptitude tests results were very good. He was told that if his physical went perfectly, he could sign a six-year commitment to the Marine Corps, become an aviation cadet and maybe become a hot shot pilot.

What happened if the physical scores were not perfect?

Well, in that case, he'd be a Marine for another six years.

Given that scenario, my father said it was easy to turn down the chance to be an aviation cadet. He said the matter wasn't anything he agonized over. The whole thing was over in a brief conversation and he never bothered to tell his parents. But the scores pleased him.

"It told me that there were a lot of people dumber than me," he said.

My father, and his siblings, grew up poor in West Oakland and the Mission District. In his quest to become an engineer, our little family had to pack its bags and move a lot. I was born in San Francisco and started kindergarten in San Francisco. But before the first day of school, I had already lived in Petaluma, Novato, Oakland and San Pablo and added three siblings along the way. My father took junior engineering positions in places like Novato and Petaluma and working second jobs, such as delivering chicken for Chicken Delight, to make ends meet. I remember being told to play quietly, so my father could study. There was a book with an odd looking old man in front of a blackboard with incomprehensible writing. Years later, I recognized the picture and identified the man as Albert Einstein.

Yet, between working and moving, my father found time to teach me to play chess at age five around the swimming pool of one of the apartment complexes. Those few games in Novato, or Petaluma, were the start of a lifelong chess rivalry, albeit one with the predictability of a Harlem Globetrotters victory over the Washington Generals.

19th Street Days

But my sharpest, and happiest childhood memories, came later, after we moved to a 19th Street apartment as we returned to San Francisco's Mission School. My maternal grandmother lived upstairs for a while. My brother Michael and I played football on the cracked sidewalk, where the parking meters served as makeshift sideline markers. We had credit at the Chinese mom and pop grocery store across the street. We took swimming lessons at the small park across the street, where we were escorted by my Auntie Tommie's kids.

We lived there from 1965 to early 1970 and to this day, if I am asked where I grew up, I mention that apartment building. That was the center of my universe.

The Swinging Sixties were underway, but my little boy's world wasn't filled by Vietnam, hippies or Martin Luther King. It was filled by school and visits to my Lopez and Arellano relatives and, especially by the sports games we attended where we watched the 49ers, Giants and the then San Francisco Warriors. At the 49ers games at Kezar, we were invariably joined by Uncle Raul, and cousins from my father's side, including my late cousin Louie, his brother Raymond and Uncle Raul's sons, Nick and Danny. They sat with my Uncles Mick, Tom, Joseph, Bob and John Nelson from my Lopez family. We sat in one intermingled big group in the end zone, every week. It was a fantasy that came true every week.

I was in heaven.

I recognized early on that the more sports trivia you knew, the more you could talk your way into the center of sports discussions, which were always happening around me. I read the Sports pages every morning before school. I practiced writing by writing out the cities in the standings. I learned who was a good player and was a bad player, on most of the teams.

Sports sometimes provided great theater. My father once let me watch this TV sports feature on Gary Beban, an award-winning quarterback who had originally flopped as a professional but was trying to make it as a running back for the Washington Redskins. The Beban story had all the elements of a good one- glamour, failure, riches and potential redemption. There was never a shortage of "Bebans" in sports to talk about. My father further fueled this addiction by letting me fill out his office's weekly football pool for him. Once, I won.

I was 8.

Away from the stadiums and sports arenas, and when not in transit from visiting relatives, it is hard to imagine much personal time for my father then, what with six people, including four small children, living in the same apartment. He took me to Delano once, to support the striking United Farm Workers. There was no preaching. We simply came to help. He helped me write a speech when I was play-acting the role of Robert Kennedy for a mock class election in the second grade.

I remember him listening to an early Rolling Stones album with the lights off in our living room. I remain struck by the lights being off. I did not know how to approach my father then. (Later, when I got into college, I imitated my father by trying to listen to music with the lights off years later. It didn't suit me so I flicked the lights back on and have left them on since.) I remember a conversation he had with my mother, while the four of us were in the back seat of the car in transit again, about Bobbi Gentry's song, "Ode to Billie Joe."

It all seemed like the most natural existence in the world back then. We lived on 19th Street. I went to Marshall Annex on Mission Street. Other kids might have move, but I had been at Marshall since kindergarten. I knew other couples broke up. But I never heard my father and mother argue. So, it seemed like we would always live on 19th Street. We would always go to Candlestick, Kezar or the Cow Palace and see the teams I already worshipped.

I was nine. I couldn't imagine anything else.

Forestville and Point Richmond

I remember waking up that February 1970 day and being told to pack our bags and being told that "we were going someplace." Originally, I remember being excited I thought I was finally going to join those "cool kids" who missed school because of some sort of vacation.

Ha!

My parents had broken up! There is nothing to be gained to by trying to do an autopsy over what happened over 30 years ago. I don't know the facts anyway. I never heard my father criticize my mother afterward. She was not belittled or demonized. She remained my mother and while there may have been more amiable partings elsewhere, their parting used to strike me as so smooth I wondered why they ever broke up.

My sisters stayed with our mother on 19th Street, before moving to other apartments. My brother and I spent the next six months on my Auntie Allie's six-acre ranch in Forestville, about as far from 19th Street as possible. There were no parking meters in front of the house, the driveway was gravel, they had a horse, cow and a barn. There were nearby orchards, where it was rumored kids were shot at if they dared to pick fruit from the trees. The television barely worked. We started classes at Forestville School the following Monday.

Tina led my brother and I to school using a short cut off Van Keppel Road. Everything about Forestville School was different than Marshall Annex. The school itself was a kindergarten through grade eight building on a two-lane country highway, nothing like Marshall School where there was incessant drilling for the 16th Street BART station. The schoolyard had grass, not concrete. These new fourth-grade classmates were not named Lorenzo and Ishmael anymore, but were Brandon, Billy, Taylor, Melissa and Karen. Mostly, I tried to stay close to my brother at lunchtime.

A visiting music teacher visited the class every week and handed me a recorder the first week. I was expected to read notes they put on the blackboard right away as the class was divided into two parts and the students were expected to state the correct note when the teacher wrote one on the chalkboard. This became a traumatizing experience which my classmates attempted to "help me" by whispering "right answers" that were always wrong when I told the teacher what they were. Eventually, I began to find my way and played ping-pong at the home of a real Forestville boy, Bobby Kay, who eventually became a local deputy's sheriff.

At home, Auntie Allie, and her children, particularly Ramona, welcomed us into their home. My brother and I desperately missed the rest of our family. Auntie took us on an Easter Egg hunt in Sebastopol. I learned to ride a bike. I bought comic books on the town's main road. We picked berries for homemade pies. We visited our cousin Lynn's friend, Cris Noonan, whose home I was at when it was announced the Beatles had broken up. We endured dinner after dinner of vegetables, something we never had to eat on 19th Street, but were standard fare on the ranch.

In other words, when at Holmes Hill, we did as the Holmes family did.

That meant we were there when Auntie Allie announced she was pregnant with her youngest child, who eventually was born and named Jovita.

Even so, my brother and I were sometimes quite sad. We missed our parents and lived for the weekend moments when my father's car might rustle up the small pebbles on the driveway that signaled his arrival in Forestville.

About an hour's drive south of Forestville, my father was rebuilding his life. Only a few years removed from being a studious and aspiring young engineer, my father moved into a rented home in Point Richmond with an even younger engineer, Bob Smythe, who had no family or children. He had red hair and was from North Carolina. There was a pool table in what might have been a dining room in other homes. Yard tools, such as rakes and hoes, hung from the living room ceiling. We rejoined our father here in August 1970.

My father had entered the Age of Aquarius. My brother and I, less than a year removed from the insulated 19th Street days, were going to sample it with him.

Dad lost weight, grew a mustache, let his hair grow a bit and often wore a green Army jacket. He had a beard for a while. My brother and I were taken to anti-war marches. It would be misleading to suggest that every day was a counter-culture event or that we were living in a Berkeley style commune. However, over the next few years, I became aware of books such as "Zen and The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance", "George Jackson: Soledad Brother," and Herman Hesse's "Siddhartha" and "The Journey to the East" appeared on our family bookshelf. He gave rides to hitchhikers. He listened in complete darkness to the Moody Blues. His friends had long hair and shared Vietnam War stories. He took us to see movies like "Summer of '42", a movie with a subject matter that is still probably over my head. We went to hippie pizza places in Berkeley. He was the only person I ever knew who voted for Shirley Chisolm, a black Texas congressman, when she ran for president in 1972.

As my own hair grew longer, more from not visiting the barber enough rather than any political statement, I remember being a bit afraid of my father's politics.

Almost as incredibly as anything happening in the counterculture was how seriously my father was being taken by some of my older cousins, and even my maternal aunts and uncles with whom he spoken when visiting my mother.

How else to explain my cousin, Rosanna Alcalá, at her dorm room at St. Mary's College, playing a Derek and the Dominoes record and asking my father for *his* opinion. I noticed this didn't seem to happen to other uncles. I was 10 or 11 and then could not articulate what I was seeing and hearing. All I could do was note that the guy who cooked for my brother and I, and took us to school, had some sort of sway on other people.

"He was out there," Uncle Raul said recently, acknowledging the charisma that surrounded my night-crawling father during this charismatic times. "He did it."

Uncle Raul said in a tone that my father had a "rough go" after his divorce from my mother. There was no real interim stage between the aspiring engineer, married with four children in a Mission District apartment, and the crash course in the Aquarian Age that awaited him after leaving 19th Street.

We didn't go to the 49ers games anymore, perhaps because they had moved to Candlestick Park, started winning, raised their ticket prices and weren't the quaint lost cause they had been at Kezar Stadium. Instead, Dad took us to new places like the Santa Cruz Boardwalk, Klamath Falls National Park, Playland at the Beach and - as always- various family gatherings.

In retrospect, it's easy to smile and remember how dashing my father was then. I wish I could say that I fully appreciated how interesting my father was at the time. I didn't. TV was telling me that our life at home should be like the "Brady Bunch." Instead, it was more like "The Courtship of Eddie's Father" except the endings were not always clean. The early Mission District days were long gone and I grew into a teenage goofball, trying to find my way while living with the world's *coolest* single dad, Uncle Danny.

Looking at how my cousin's lived, it was obvious that we were living different sorts of lives. Their lives were dominated by church and youth sports and, at least outwardly, had the appeal of stability. They often stayed in the same house for several years. Two or three years ago, I ran into a cousin I had not seen in several years who reminded me how bitterly I complained about visiting her house, a house she still lived in 30 years later. I tried to explain, briefly, how tired my brother and I were of being in upheaval and babysitters then. She didn't listen or care.

In 1972, my father married a tremendous woman, Andrea Jurgelewicz, then a Republican from Connecticut, and we moved from Point Richmond to San Leandro, where I attended high school. It wasn't a memorable time for me. I left San Leandro two months after high school and - after taking a year off- attended City College of San Francisco.

But even separated by the Bay, HE was never very far from what I did. HE had also attended City College in the 1950s as a member of the Chess Club. When I turned 18 and registered to vote, there was never any question but I'd register as a liberal Democrat - like HIM. I found myself wanting to listen to the same music HE played in our house. I bought the Rolling Stones and Neil Young albums, sometimes playing music with the lights off and probably startling a few friends in the process.

I was astonished when people I respected began loaning me "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" and "Soledad Brother" - books HE had read and I had left on his bookshelf. (HE had gotten there first, ahead of the cool crowd, I noticed.) When they recommended the books to me, I nodded knowingly even though I scrambled to read the books later afterward. I am not sure I ever credited my father with reading those books when I was 20. It might not have been the cool thing to admit.

My friends wanted to be different from their hum drum parents, who had taken them to church every Sunday. Um, I was watching the NFL most Sunday mornings. They wanted to march for causes. Dad had taken me on marches against Vietnam a decade earlier. Later, as I grew older and my own feelings about the United Farm Workers began to develop, along with the state's attitudes. I began to regard not as the union which kept me from eating

grapes as a boy, but as the significant political and cultural cause they were. If I let drop the time Dad had taken me to Delano support them while they were on strike, I've seen faces freeze and become filled with pride. Yes, I at Delano but one time and then only because of my father, I hasten to add.

Really, with this sort of pedigree by the time I was 14, what kind can of rebellion did that leave for me then?

2005

It's been decades since all of those things happened that shaped my own quirky existence. My family and I have both found our way. My father, Andi and John, who probably can't imagine our father circa 1971, live in a beautiful home in Millbrae. We lived five miles away in San Bruno.

We gather at holidays. Sometimes, my father and I still play chess, just as we did outside the Novato apartments back in the 1960s. He plays to win. I play to give him a good game. He still beats me. I am not gratified my little son has played my father chess, keeping the tradition alive.

The bounds between my father and I, and the teams he introduced me to in the 1960s, have been loosened but still fairly strong.

Today, Kezar Stadium has been drastically scaled back and anyone who wants to walk across the hallowed grass where our heroes played in front of thousands of people can do so. The 49ers over a generation ago moved to Candlestick Park and have since won five Super Bowls.

Some of my relatives who attended those games aren't alive anymore. Or they have moved on to *serious adulthood*, dismissing professional sports with the bored air of someone who would as soon discuss BART train schedules as overpaid football players and useless statistics.

But my father, brother John, Uncle Raul and Auntie Loretta still attend games. I still follow the team, and always will. But I do so because out of an almost religious devotion to the Kezar Stadium days, as I do because of any deep allegiance to the players who wear the team uniform. My favorite 49er teams were not the Super Bowl winners, but the losing teams that I saw play at Kezar. My own son can't be bothered with watching them.

At family gatherings, I don't fret as much about my father's popularity. I listen, more carefully, with more pride than I did as a boy, to the praise heaped upon him by his siblings. They continue to praise the same qualities - demeanor, practicality, intellect and modesty.

"He doesn't toot his horn," Uncle Raul said of my father's modesty. "He never did. I always did it for him."

As for me?

I am simply trying not to make him vomit, the way I did when I entered the world all those years ago. It's probably a safer goal than aspiring to beat him at chess.