Culture



Amid their grief, my wife, Sylvia, her three brothers and all the spouses have swung into action to make sure their father is honored and supported.(Unsplash/Tyler Nix)

by Joe Ferullo

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It's Father's Day every day around my house lately. And this has brought into our lives a bittersweet mix of beauty, tragedy, melancholy and comfort.

My wife's mother, Maria, passed away suddenly about a week ago. Nearly 90-years-old, she was vital, vibrant and healthy — a woman who, well into her 80s, helped the homeless each week at the Catholic Worker soup kitchen and conducted ministry every Sunday in Spanish for teenagers locked up in the Los Angeles County Central Juvenile Hall.

Her death left behind my wife's father, Armando, almost 95 and struggling with dementia. A gracious and gentle man, he wakes up most mornings to learn all over again that his wife of 63 years is gone.

Amid their grief, my wife, Sylvia, her three brothers and all the spouses have swung into action to make sure their father is honored and supported. Schedules have been drawn up, shifts shared and swapped, so that someone is always there to help out at his house or ours. The multi-colored Word document Sylvia has created looks like the flow chart for a three-shift workday at a Ford plant in Detroit.

My wife and her brothers are exhausted at times. The demands of memory loss care are constant and layered with a gray gauze of sad anticipation, knowing that what lies ahead is only more loss. But the quality of their devotion is something quite rare.

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A couple of nights ago, the reason behind that dedication was pulled out of a box. One of the brothers found a carton filled with old slides and an ancient projector. Everyone sat on the couch with their father while, on a rickety screen discovered in the back of a closet, images rolled by of a man who had long ago discovered that supposedly modern thing we call work/life balance.

Armando was raised poor; his father painted houses during the Great Depression. He pushed himself and became a dedicated dentist who loved what he did. Armando donated his time to poor children who couldn't pay for his work, and in retirement, oversaw a dental clinic for the homeless at L.A.'s enormous Union Rescue Mission.

But he enjoyed his life and his family, too. In that living room in his house, filled with framed photos of everything from baptisms to weddings, we watched slide after slide. Houseboat trips on Lake Powell, camping excursions in the desert, Halloween parties where he dressed up as a caveman alongside his kids. In his garage was a fully outfitted workbench used to repair anything around the house — and, in his spare time, restore rusted Mustangs and Thunderbirds from the 1960s.

At a certain point, I slide into the picture. I met Sylvia soon after I moved to L.A. from New York, and her father quickly became my California father. There he is in photos at our first house — a fixer-upper with a stunning view of Long-Term Parking Lot D at Los Angeles International Airport. He showed up every weekend armed with his hammer, drills and a circular saw, ready to put in some sweat equity for us.



Everyone sat on the couch with their father while, on a rickety screen discovered in the back of a closet, images rolled by of a man who had long ago discovered that supposedly modern thing we call work/life balance. (Unsplash/Anne Nygard)

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Over the years, there were plenty of heartfelt, homemade Father's Day cards with his name on it, plenty of bad ties, a closetful of it's-the-thought-that-counts shirts and belts from his sons and daughter. Displays of love and gratitude were imprinted on coffee mugs and a fisherman's cap.

But the best gift is the one the family has saved for last.

My wife takes her father now to as many big band dances as she can find. West Coast swing is his favorite and at age 94 he still moves with grace and ease as his daughter watches the years fall away from his face. When he's here with us, our house is filled with the voices of Tony Bennett, Frank Sinatra and Edie Gorme. And when he gets up from dinner to fold his napkin, thanks us all, but insists he needs to go home to Maria, his family is there to hold him and tell him it's going to be OK. He's not alone.

Sometimes it feels like not enough, other times like more than can be handled. We do the best we can.

And all we can do, for as much time as we have, while he remembers those around him, while his memories remain vivid and his essence is still there, is to make sure every day is Father's Day.

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