

LESSON 15

Recognizing Superheroes Among Us



Except for some of the guys who dated his younger sisters, Chris loves others freely without reservation or judgment. He's an uninhibited, friendly guy who genuinely enjoys people. In high school he thought everyone was his friend. While walking across his high school campus, he offered and received dozens of "heys" and high-fives. Apparently, everyone *was* his friend.

When he was a young child, Chris' uninhibited friendliness toward strangers caused me great concern at stores, theaters, and especially in transient places like gas stations and parks. Many encounters served up interesting moments, and some were nerve-racking. Eventually I recognized how Chris' seemingly random selection of strangers provided life-altering lessons.

When Chris gave a thumbs up or called out to a stranger, "hey dude," or "yor cool," I looked up, expecting to greet a friend. But rarely was it someone we knew. I didn't always know what to say to these people who often

looked as uncomfortable as I felt. A few would look away and pretend not to hear or see Chris, however most of the time people responded with a kind smile. Still, I was uneasy, and my nerves jumped every time he reached out to a stranger.

It was common to worry about the safety of young children in 1990s southern California. And because Chris' speech was difficult to understand, he was especially vulnerable. Struggling to know what to teach him about interacting with those we didn't know, I coached him about "stranger danger" but also about loving one another. I often pondered the wide contradictory spectrum between the two concepts but didn't quite know how to reconcile them. Always cognizant of the potential danger of kidnappings, it seemed critical for me to set boundaries to protect him and his younger sisters. Nonetheless, Chris would readily take candy from strangers! What was I to do?

This contradiction prompted me to examine my judgment of others. I noticed how I didn't mind as much when Chris spoke to a well-dressed person—especially dressed in a suit—but I was uneasy when he approached people with extensive tattoos and body piercings. In those days, people adorned this way seemed both exotic and dangerous; they looked the type to have criminal backgrounds. To give perspective, during the early 1990s, tattoos and body art weren't as mainstream as they are today and because I worked in the judicial system, I could

recognize prison tattoos. The 1990s also ushered in an era of increased fear in Southern California. Brazen crimes against children headlined the news. Suburban kids no longer played unsupervised outside for hours or into the night and children were either sequestered inside their homes or escorted in public.

My uneasiness and worry turned to anxiety and distress the evening sixteen-year-old Chris and I attended his first World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) event at the San Diego Sports Arena. Just being there made me uptight and uncomfortable. But when Chris exuberantly pounded the back of the heavily tatted guy seated next to him, I went into shock. While I calmed myself with breathing techniques, I learned years before in Lamaze class when pregnant, Chris looked thrilled as he gestured and yelled with his new friend. The young man had long, spiked blue hair and three chains dangling from three piercings on his nose linking to piercings on his right ear. It took all my energy to not stare, yet I still caught myself stealing glances of him out of the corner of my eye.

I longed to ask, “Doesn’t that hurt? How do those chains not get tangled when you sleep or shower?” But I said nothing. Chris, however, didn’t hesitate to talk with him—and didn’t mention the chains.

I recalled the night of the dinner in our home about four years prior, when our local ward bishop was so accepting of Chris’ WWE fetish. I’d come out of the closet and began my journey of accepting Chris’ favorite

sport. That night in the sports arena, however, was a new stretch of acceptance for me. I fought back my judgmental instincts, and sunk low in my chair, feeling awkwardly out of place.

Not long after the wrestling mayhem on stage began, Chris and his friend were sharing high-fives, cheering their favorite champions and booing the bad guys in unison. Rarely had I seen Chris so animated or happily engaged. I sat quietly on the other side of him enjoying the show! It wasn't the wrestling which entertained me, it was Chris' excitement and noticing the shift of my attitude toward the guy with the chains. It felt great to share a genuine smile as we said goodbye to the young man at the end of the evening. As I thanked him for making the event much more fun for my son, I gently touched his arm and sincerely wished him well in his life.

Another encounter with a stranger which I will never forget happened at Walmart™ when Chris was about seventeen. Walmart was usually my last choice of shopping sites, but Chris loved the store since they stocked WWE memorabilia. Chris wandered away from me while I looked at books. From an aisle away, I heard Chris exclaim, "Cool!" which, although loud, didn't alarm me. I just figured he found something he wanted to buy. But I jerked my head up when I heard a deep, booming male voice ask, "What? You talking to me?" The ominous voice came from the same proximity as where I thought Chris was, so I rushed my cart around the endcap

to find my son. I panicked when I saw him at the other end of the aisle looking up at an exceptionally large—both tall and wide—man with a belly to match. A black leather vest hung from his shoulders exposing his beefy arms covered with black and gray tattoos—which looked like prison tats decorating almost every inch of the man’s bare skin, including his bald head and neck. Everything about him was intimidating, even his heavy black boots with thick silver chains. Chris stood with his back to me, facing this man who was leaning against a shelf and studying my son. I had no doubt the man was a seasoned gang member.

I was so nervous that I almost tripped over my own feet as I hurried toward them. Before I could reach Chris, I saw him give the man a thumbs up while patting his own extended tummy as he repeated, “Cool!”

I felt light-headed, but a rush of adrenaline helped me quickly get to my son. I stood behind him and put a hand on each of his shoulders. Typically, whenever Chris approached people who made me nervous, I would try to graciously offer some type of apology while pulling Chris away. This time however, I feared the man—who Chris appeared to be mocking for his wide girth—probably had a brotherhood of men hanging out nearby. I must’ve been physically shaking as I blurted out, “Oh, my son appears to be impressed by your stature. Please excuse us.” (*Stature?* I blushed at my word choice.) I met the man’s eyes only for a second before yanking Chris’ arm back

toward me to leave. But his feet were planted securely, and he refused to budge.

“Yor cool,” Chris said, fully fixated on the man. He gave the man a full-faced grin with clear admiration in his sparkling eyes. This drove my panic into high gear and I stepped in to be closer to Chris, wondering how to explain to this gang member my son’s pure heart and that Chris wasn’t intentionally taunting him. Rather, I knew Chris genuinely admired him. I had no idea how to make a smooth escape but knew we needed to. Immediately.

I stood wide-eyed and frozen beside my son as the man looked Chris up and down. After what seemed to be a long minute of silence but probably lasted only a few seconds, the man nodded slightly and said, “You look like you’ve eaten a horse or two yourself.”

“Yuuup,” Chris replied with a nod.

“What’s your name, Buddy?” The man’s face hinted at a slight smile.

I glanced at Chris as he turned to look at me. He didn’t say anything, but I knew what his look meant. I gulped, hoping my fear wasn’t too noticeable, and looked up, and up and up at the man. I translated Chris’ thoughts in the most polite voice I could muster, with a feigned smile, “My son is probably wondering how you know Buddy is his nickname.”

“That’s because you’re a cool dude and it *should* be your nickname.” The man gave an even bigger smile as he cocked his head and looked directly at Chris. “What

are you buying today?”

“Moovie,” Chris reached into our cart, pulled out the movie *Sharknado* and held it up with a proud grin.

I cringed with embarrassment. *Oh great*, I thought. *Now, if there's a scene and I have to call Security, everyone would know I buy ridiculous, brain-dead movies like Sharknado.* What sort of woman would buy that movie? (The obvious answer: a woman who gets in precarious scenarios with dangerous men!)

“Oh, good choice, Buddy!” The man took the movie from Chris and eyed its cover.

Chris gave the man another thumbs up and mumbled words which I couldn't understand. I assumed he explained the theatrical value of a movie about a tornado intense enough to suck up sharks from the ocean and hurl them miles away.

“I know. It's a great movie,” the man replied as he leaned over to replace it back in our cart.

That was the moment I melted. This man seemed to understand what Chris said even when I couldn't. Only a few people can clearly decipher Chris' mumbled speech. I stood silently while Chris and this man talked about other movies they liked. The man focused squarely on Chris' face, carefully listening before replying. The sincere interest and respect he showed for my son touched my heart. During the five to eight minutes we stood talking in the store aisle, both my prejudice and my guard thawed, and I felt a genuine smile form on my face. At the

end of the conversation, I thanked him for his kindness in sharing his time with my son.

“Oh, not a problem,” he replied. “You’re a lucky mom.”

“Yes, I really am. How amazing are you—not everyone understands that!” I gave an involuntary wink and a thumbs up and walked away holding Chris’ hand. Chris turned to wave good-bye to our new friend and yelled with a confident nod, “Stay Cool!”

“You too, Buddy!” our new friend yelled back. We had made an unlikely friendship—and I grinned in disbelief as I realized I had just winked at a gang member. A nervous laugh escaped me—but I perhaps our alliance might come in handy someday if I ever needed protection.

Throughout his life Professor Higgins has taught me about the native goodness of people. We’ve shared many more educational encounters like the WWE event and the Walmart meeting which taught me to look for and see the good in people. I’ve been transforming from a mother who reminds her son not to talk to strangers to a fascinated participant in unexpected encounters. I no longer look at those I don’t know through filters of judgment or fear and believe the strangers Chris chooses to interact with are not just random. I’ve learned to trust Chris’ ability to see past people’s outward appearance and into their hearts.

These days when Chris speaks to strangers, I smile and nod or exchange polite greetings, confident I have the

pleasure of being in the presence of someone wonderful. Sometimes I stop and interpret Chris' messages for them, or I engage in a conversation curious to meet the person Chris has singled out. I'm no longer embarrassed when Chris reaches out to strangers, and I don't worry about their reactions. Now, I smile and remain awestruck by the continual flow of new acquaintances and friends into our lives. I haven't forgotten the days before having the privilege of loving a child with Down syndrome when I would've judged people who looked different.

Chris' siblings and I value his superpower to read hearts and often jest about his usefulness as a "human litmus test" for detecting people with good souls. On occasion his sisters have secretly tested their crushes by introducing them to Chris to note his reaction. If Chris likes the new friend, it helps his sisters decide if they will continue to date. Although he loves others easily, he warms up more to some—who are good-hearted—than others. And I'm often pleased to see how some people naturally know how to connect with Chris and receive his love. They somehow know how to not baby him or talk down to him, but they simply accept Chris as he is and see his genuine worth. This acceptance alone elicits my acceptance and respect for them.

Chris hasn't gone unrewarded for his superpower of attracting beautiful people. For example, one Christmas when Chris was thirty, I found about fifteen different gift cards in his bulging wallet.

“Where did you get all these gift cards?” I asked.

“Friends a da gym,” he replied in his usual matter-of-fact tone.

“Which friends? In exchange for what?” Chris worked out at the gym three times a week with his Care-Rite job coach in the mornings while I was at work. I worried because we didn’t have any family friends who mentioned they saw Chris at the gym.

“What are your friend’s names?” I probed further.

“Umhhh.” And with a shrug of his shoulders, he had nothing else to say about it.

“My Buddy, you have over \$150 in gift cards, and you don’t know their names?” I asked.

He replied with a cheeky, “Hee Hee.”

I later asked his job coach about the gift cards, and she explained there were lots of kind men at the gym who routinely encouraged Chris on the treadmill. They talked every week, and some matched their schedules to be there at the same time to cheer him on. Those generous gifts were repeated every Christmas for as long as he attended the gym. I’ve never met those men, but it has melted my heart knowing there are heroes in the world who show such kindness to my son—especially when I’m not around to interpret for him or protect him.

Chris has special attachments to many people and has adopted some friends as family by calling them brothers, cousins, aunts and uncles. He means it. It’s a love title for life.

He refers to my sister (his Aunt KayLani) as Aunt Mae, Spiderman's kind, loving aunt. Everyone else sees a strong, determined, smart woman who can be a force of nature, but Chris sees KayLani as kind and loving. Since Chris can't write text messages, KayLani sends him pictures and memes. No matter how busy she is with her own 6 children and 13 grandchildren, for years she has carved out time to send hundreds of text pictures.

"Aww," I heard Aunt KayLani sigh once when Chris called her Aunt Mae, "Thank you for seeing the good in me."

Chris called Herb, my late brother, "Superman." Although I always knew my brother to be a compassionate and exceptionally nice man, I originally thought Chris' choice of nickname to be a bit off. Herb had many strengths: he was brilliant, inventive, accomplished, generous, funny and kind. Although he loved wilderness adventures, I wouldn't describe him as the strong, powerful character typical of Superman. However, when his Uncle Herb lived with us when he became ill in his later years, I saw Chris' joyful interactions with him and realized I had never truly known my brother. I delighted in getting to know Herb through Chris' eyes; they played tag by hiding around the house and surprising each other. Even if Herb was working, he never seemed bothered when Chris interrupted him with a startling, "Tag yor it!" They played daily and for thirty-forty minutes—which I considered to be irritatingly prolonged periods of time.

But my brother laughed and surprised Chris right back.

Although I was in my fifties, I was surprised to discover that Chris talked much more when I wasn't close by. I came to know my brother better, as well as my son when I overheard their long conversations about sports, friends, Star Trek and other TV shows. Herb was a true friend to his nephew; he noticed when Chris appeared upset and cared enough to know why.

One day Herb explained to me why Chris became angry every time I moved his WWE figures when dusting his bedroom. Chris was about thirty years old at the time and had been collecting figures since he was eight. He had hundreds of WWE figures, stacked ten deep on bookshelves all around his room, and it took a long time to remove and replace all the figures during cleaning. Herb explained how Chris had intentionally organized them by differing championship titles, rivalries and winners. I'd never imagined there was a sophisticated organizational arrangement for what I thought were merely toys. I had no idea Chris was that clever! After learning this, I changed my cleaning protocol to keep the figures in their exact order and enjoyed Chris' grateful smile and hug each time I finished dusting. (Thank you, Superman.)

Uncle Herb died in 2017. To this day, whenever Chris and I pass the local hospital Herb stayed in for extended medical treatment, Chris blows a kiss toward the hospital and says, "Superman's hosbital." And I think to myself,

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“Wow! I’m so lucky to have been Superman’s sister.”

However, I’ve felt so much more than just lucky to have my own Professor Higgins who could introduce me to Superman, and to so many other superheroes in our world.