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# Moms Behind the Leaders

Real Life Superheroes: The Mom Behind Reinvented's CEO

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There's arguably no stronger influence in a child's early life than that of her mother. Mothers are our earliest example of strength, character, and womanhood. Today, we celebrate the sacrifices and unconditional support of mothers everywhere by sharing the story of Reinvented's First Mom, Betty Looney.

Betty Looney was born to a young woman named Maria in the Southwestern Ecuadorian town of Guayaquil, a port city situated along the Guayas River lined with packed dirt roads and small houses. Born in 1965, Betty would be the second of Maria's three children. Though Betty remembers little of her days in Ecuador, many of her afternoons were spent roaming around the town, snacking on gooseberries and exploring the local open-air markets with her cousins.

Maria immigrated to the United States when Betty was two years old, leaving her daughters in the care of their abuelita. Fleeing an unhealthy relationship, Maria, unbeknownst to Betty's biological father, had purchased a flight to New York City where she hoped to find work to support

herself and her children. She was taken in by a few cousins in Queens who taught her the art of wig-making. Maria created toupées and hairpieces for a living and sent a portion of each paycheck back to Ecuador.

Betty was four years old when her mother sent for her daughters to join her in New York. The girls moved into a home with Maria, their new stepfather, and an infant half-brother. Maria's marriage lasted about eight years — after the divorce, a motorcycle accident left her former husband unable to work or pay child support. As a result, Maria became the family's sole breadwinner and caretaker. Betty and her siblings never wanted for the essentials; however, the family's financial situation was precarious at best, and Maria struggled to make ends meet. Though the lack of money was a consistent chokehold on the family's aspirations, Maria was adamant that her children learn to play piano and scraped together money to pay for their lessons. "I don't know how she did it, but she managed," Betty says. "My mom has always been an extremely hard worker."

Though Betty would grow up thousands of miles away from her hometown in one



of the most progressive cities in the world, her mother's traditional Ecuadorian values followed the family to their new home. Ecuadorian culture during the time of Maria's upbringing enforced strict gender roles: women were expected to be mothers and caretakers of the home, and men were the breadwinners and decision-makers. A high school education was a privilege afforded to few girls, and women rarely, if ever, inherited any form of wealth. "As a woman, you basically did what you were told — first by your father, and then by your husband. I didn't like that," Betty says.

As a single mother, Maria's life, in many ways, defied tradition. Regardless, she remained largely committed to conservative values. Like many immigrants, Maria struggled to understand how a culture vastly different from that of her native country would shape her children's values. "I remember my mother's

surprise when I wanted to get my driver's license — she didn't understand why I would need to be able to drive myself around when eventually, my husband would do that," Betty recalls.

After graduating from high school, Betty began attending SUNY Maritime College in the Bronx to study marine engineering, a decision that again puzzled her mother. "My mother never discouraged me from pursuing what she saw as traditionally male paths, but she didn't really encourage it either. More than anything, I don't think she understood why I wanted to do the things I did," Betty says. Witnessing her mother's struggle to provide for the family drove Betty toward a career with good pay and stability. "I didn't want to depend on anyone," she says.

As Maria lacked the means to support her daughter's ambitions, Betty paid her own way through college. She joined the crew and tennis teams and began dating a computer science major named Jerry Looney. Betty graduated as a U.S. Navy Reservist and joined Gibbs & Cox, a naval architecture firm where she designed piping systems for military vessels.

After a lengthy courtship, Betty and Jerry tied the knot and soon became pregnant with their first child — a girl they would name Caeley.

The pair was thrilled. For Betty, starting a family was an opportunity to give her children what she didn't have: financial stability and a nuclear family. More importantly, Betty wanted her kids to know the sky was the limit. After growing up with a mother who couldn't quite understand her ambitions, Betty committed to becoming her children's biggest cheerleader. Caeley's passion, determination, and precocity for a variety of subjects gave Betty and Jerry no shortage of things to cheer for. From Girl Scouts to FIRST Robotics, to sports like dance and taekwondo, there wasn't much Caeley wasn't willing to try. And there wasn't much she wasn't good at.

"Caeley has always been so bright and creative. Even when she was little, she was very competitive and wanted to be the best at everything," Betty notes.

Caeley's incredible drive and focus, however, came with its challenges. Her desire to be the best bordered on perfectionism, and she would often become dangerously self-critical when her performance came up short. Still, Betty and Jerry never considered her angst abnormal, writing it off as the natural consequence of demanding schoolwork and extracurriculars.

Things changed during Caeley's first summer home after her freshman year of college. "Going away to college definitely pushed me over the edge," she remembers. "At that point, I was a thousand miles away from my family, and I didn't have an in-person crutch to keep me grounded and calm." She confided to her parents that she was struggling, and Betty suggested she see a therapist. Shortly after Caeley enrolled in therapy, Betty received an unanticipated call.

"The therapist told me Caeley had been self-harming to cope with her anxiety," Betty says.

The scars across Caeley's legs would become an ever-present reminder of one of the darkest periods of her life. "We never knew because she always wore pants."

Betty was heartbroken and frightened — though stigma surrounding mental illness is on the decline, many mental illnesses are still poorly understood. They are also frequently misdiagnosed and mismanaged, particularly in women and people of color.

"I was so anxious. I knew this would be a long road for her," Betty recalls.

Caeley was diagnosed with extreme anxiety disorder, major depressive disorder, and a panic disorder. Her therapist placed her in an outpatient program to help manage her symptoms. Caeley completed the program successfully and planned to return to campus in the fall for her sophomore year. Though Betty was reluctant to let her

daughter out of her sight, Caeley's therapist believed schoolwork, friends, and extracurriculars would keep her mind occupied. "I gave my phone number to every single one of Caeley's friends and acquaintances that I knew of," Betty says. "I asked them to keep an eye on her and to let me know if anything was off."

Betty and Jerry made a routine of spending quality, in-person time with Caeley despite their distance.

"I would go and stay with Caeley at least two weekends a month, sometimes more if things were especially hard for her," says Betty.

The intensifying demands of schoolwork and other personal challenges landed Caeley in the hospital multiple times during college. Though her battles with anxiety and depression were incredibly painful for both her and her family, they brought Caeley and Betty closer than ever. Conversations became more meaningful as Betty reminded Caeley why her life was worth living. Betty's unwavering compassion and commitment to understanding her daughter's illness was critical to Caeley's healing journey.

"My mom never once told me that my mental illness was just a phase or that it was all in my head," Caeley remarks. "She genuinely tried (and still does try) to understand what I was going through and did her best to support me however I needed her to."

Today, Caeley's family is still the foundation of her support system. Betty is always ready to talk her out of a rut, provide encouragement, and help with the magazine. "Caeley still has her bad days, but her father and I are here to

remind her that she's strong, capable, and worthy. And we're also here to warn her when it's time to slow down to keep her mental health in check."

Visits today are less frequent with the demands of Caeley's full-time job (and a pandemic), but Betty and Caeley stay close through daily texts and phone calls, as well as through their special tea-time ritual: "Growing up, tea was the cure for just about everything. Bad grades, bad day, mean boys, you name it — tea was the cure," Caeley says.

"Every time something goes wrong, my mom reminds me to make myself a cup of tea and calm down before doing anything else. We Facetime and drink tea together, and she sometimes tries to talk me through how to make her tea — even though I always fail," Caeley laughs. "Knowing that she's always a phone call away with a virtual cup of tea means everything to me."

Betty has the gift of always knowing exactly what to say to raise her daughter's spirits and provide guidance. She shared some of the advice she's given Caeley: "I always tell her to follow her passion. Making a living is important, but it's possible to love what you do and still be able to support yourself."

The most important piece of advice, however, comes from the heart of Ecuadorian culture: "Family is always first! No matter what happens, I'm the mom. And that means I'll always have Caeley's back."