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ALL IN THE FAMILY

These kids went to work with their mom or dad -- and stayed there

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Legal legacy: Jill Hersh (left) and her sister, Nancy Hersh, followed in the footsteps of their dad, Leroy Hersh. All three are practicing attorneys in San Francisco. Chronicle photo by Katy Raddatz

So, what do you want to be when you grow up?

Hundreds of adults will undoubtedly ask children this question today as students participate in Take Our Daughters and Sons to Work Day. The new Ms. Foundation program replaces the decade-old Take Our Daughters to Work Day, which encouraged girls to pursue their goals.

The answer will be simple for some boys and girls. They may love animals and long to be a veterinarian. Or maybe they want to reach the stars as an astronaut or compose music like Beethoven.

Others, however, may look to different heroes -- Mom and Dad. For the following five Bay Area professionals, there was little doubt they would walk in their parents' shoes.

And why not? They were the best role models around.

LAW SCHOOL AT THE DINNER TABLE

Every day could have been Take Our Daughters to Work Day at Nancy and Jill Hersh's home.

The San Francisco women remember their father, Leroy Hersh, studying for law school exams. He discussed cases with his daughters at the dinner table. Later, they heard his arguments in court.

"He looked so happy doing what he did," said Nancy, 57. "He was so focused."

Leroy Hersh, now 83, knows he influenced his daughters at a time when many girls were being directed into careers like nursing and teaching. But he didn't realize how much of an impact he had until Nancy, and then Jill, said they wanted to be attorneys.

"My daughters grew up in a home where there were no limits placed on what they could do," said Leroy Hersh, whose ex-wife, Belle, was active in the women's movement.

Nancy, who says she decided to be a lawyer at the age of 12, shares a law practice -- Hersh & Hersh -- with her father. Jill Hersh, 50, also decided on her career at a young age and has a law practice in San Francisco.

"I felt like this was always what I wanted to do," she said. "My parents said, 'Whatever you do, use your abilities.' Both of them gave us the message that anything was possible."

HELPING GRIEVING FAMILIES

As a youth, Sandra Jones Spencer followed her father, Charles Jones, around Jones Mortuary in East Palo Alto.

Spencer watched as he handled funeral arrangements and stepped in to help with small things: registering flowers, greeting grieving clients at the door, vacuuming floors.

"I just loved spending time with my father," Spencer said.

But Spencer, who did not want to give her age, says she also fell in love with the work.

After graduating from UC Berkeley with a degree in economics, Spencer asked her father if she could work at the funeral home over the summer.

She's been working there ever since.

"I really like helping people through a difficult time in their lives," she said. "You can't bring back the person they've lost. But you can help them through the grieving process the best you can."

Jones, 65, says he never steered his daughter in any one direction, although he tried to set a good example.

"I wanted her to be whatever she wanted to be," Jones said. "If she wanted to be in the family business, I wanted her to know the door was open. If she didn't, I wanted her know that I'd still love her."

FIREFIGHTING LEGACY

When Tim Phipps decided to become a firefighter, he knew he had some big boots to fill.

His father, Edward Phipps, was appointed San Francisco fire chief in 1987. His grandfather, Fred Phipps, was a lieutenant in the city's fire department. An uncle and cousins also battle blazes.

Phipps, 44, was determined to make his own mark as a firefighter. He's now fire chief at the Presidio Fire Department, the same place his father started out after the Korean War.

"I was always fascinated when I visited my father," Phipps said. "I liked the atmosphere and all the excitement going on there."

Edward Phipps, 72, said he never gave much thought to whether his three sons would be firefighters. But he's glad Tim chose his profession.

His oldest son, Kevin, is a police officer. Tim's twin brother, Mike, is a teacher.

"It makes you feel good," said Ed Phipps. "You know you must have done something right if your child wants to follow in your footsteps."

SON STEPPING IN

Businesswoman Gwen Kaplan introduced her son, Miles Kaplan, to her workplace long before the movement to bring children to work took hold. In fact, Miles spent time at Ace Mailing before he was born.

An old photograph shows Kaplan, pregnant with Miles, standing in front of a mailing machine she bought for her San Francisco company. It's the same machine that Miles, now 23, has operated in recent weeks as one of Ace Mailing's newest employees.

"Miles has always been around here," said Gwen Kaplan, smiling.

Indeed, Miles, a UCLA graduate, spent countless days at Ace, picking up business basics after school. Gwen Kaplan, a former social worker, founded Ace in 1978.

Her husband, Stephen Kaplan, runs a graphic design business.

Although Miles is considering law school, he already has the skills to take over one day. He's the company computer whiz and has taught his mother and grandmother a thing or two. His grandmother, Royce Dyer, also works at Ace.

"I have always looked up to them and admired them," Miles said of his parents. "The fact that they owned their own businesses made me more independent."

DAD THE BEST TEACHER

Susan Lopez-Guerra visited her father's office many times growing up. But she never realized how hard he worked until she actually did his job.

"I never had an idea of what my dad did until I was in high school," she said. "I remember the first full day I put in. I thought, 'How does he do it?' "

At UC Berkeley, Lopez-Guerra thought she wanted to be a doctor. But she abandoned that plan before her junior year and had no other career in mind.

She was certain of two things, however. She could sell almost anything. And, like her father, Oscar Lopez-Guerra, she loved cars.

Lopez-Guerra, 41, joined her father's San Mateo auto leasing business, Lease Mobile California Inc., in 1987 after he suggested she give it a try. She worked her way up, starting out as a leasing representative.

"I could have gone to any other company, and I never would have learned as much," she said. "I had someone who was so interested in teaching me."

Lopez-Guerra started her own leasing company in 1998, enduring many sleepless nights just as her father had years before.

But she has no regrets.

"The success of the company is based on how much I put into it," she said. "I'm my own boss."

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