

Episode 139: Tricia smuggled her dad into Disney World

Every tourist destination wants their guests to have a happy experience, but few places do that as well as Disney World in Orlando, Florida.

When Disney World visitors were surveyed, 75% said they were very satisfied with their experience.

Did you know, the Magic Kingdom Park at Disney World gets around 21 million visitors every year? And if you combine all of the Disney parks, it's around 58 million people each year. And people keep coming back. And for anyone with kids, it's a no-brainer – that's where the kids want to go.

My guest today is Tricia. She and her sister, Heather, and their mom and dad, would make trips to Disney World every year. It was a family tradition that they all looked forward to.

They knew the layout of the Magic Kingdom by heart, and it didn't matter that the rides, the attractions, and the fireworks were the same as when they were there the year before. It was their place.

But there was one family trip to Disney World that was not like any of the others.

Scott

I'm talking with you today, but pretty soon people are going to realize this story is really about your dad. Can you just kind of give us a quick picture of who your dad was?

Tricia

My dad was awesome. It's hard to talk about my dad without sharing a little bit about what he looked like. He was tall and heavyset. When he was younger, he had curly black hair which greyed once he got a little bit older. He always worked. He was a really hard worker most of his life. He worked in the produce marketplace just outside of Boston. He had a Boston accent. I remember he would work early mornings every morning. Deliveries of fruit and vegetables would come through the marketplace. He would be ordering fruit and vegetables for supermarkets and they would be loaded on trucks later. He drove those trucks and everybody knew him. He was a loud and quick-witted presence and a big smoker. He smoked 2 packs of Larks a day - I don't even know if they still sell them, but I have a pack of his larks that I keep. I remember him just being silly and quiet at other times.

Scott

Yeah. It sounds that, in a job like that, you almost have to be loud and extroverted because there's so much action and things happening all the time.

Tricia

Yeah. It was a very entertaining place to visit when I was younger. It was like being backstage at a theater production.

Scott

Your mom and dad met up and they got married. That's when they discovered Disney World. How did that happen?

Tricia

They met in 1980 and they were married that same year. My mom is a singer and a bass player in a band - the same band for over 40 years - and they do covers of memorable songs. They used to play a lot of weddings and a lot of clubs. One night, my mom was playing at a club where my dad was working as a line cook at the time and he asked her out, and that was that. They fell in love. Later, we used to joke that the Beatles song was about my parents because, if you know the lyrics, one of them worked in a marketplace, the other was a singer in a band, and they had a couple of kids which, in our case, was me and my younger sister. They honeymooned at Disney World.

Scott

Was that just by chance that they went there on their honeymoon or had either one of them been there before that?

Tricia

My mom went - I want to say - when she was in high school on a class trip. She went to Disney World in Florida. My dad had never been. So when they were thinking of a destination, my mom suggested Disney World. So it was my dad's first time. My mom would say she didn't know if he even liked it because he didn't give much of a reaction. She would say, "He didn't say anything." Later, she realized that he was overwhelmed. I think, part of that was he had a tough upbringing and I think seeing the imagination and the fantasy of something like Disney World which really strikes you as just a very delightful, fanciful place when you first see Disney World. I think he found a little bit of safety in that, and he loved my mom so much that he was overwhelmed with love and joy.

Scott

It's called the happiest place on Earth. Everything is over the top, overwhelming, big, and happy. I can kind of see why he would have that reaction. You guys kind of made that your family destination every year.

Tricia

It's true.

Scott

I mean, Disney World was kind of a big part of your family - would that be accurate?

Tricia

A huge part. We went to Disney World as a family almost every year. My dad wasn't a Disney movie fan. He was a Disney Park fan and loved the music. Even though he wasn't a Disney movie watcher, he loved the score from so many of the animated movies - Aladdin in particular, as well as the original music from the Disney rides. We would go to the pool. In addition to my mom being in a band, she was also a music teacher. She taught music to children in public school and she also gave music lessons. So our vacations happened every August because my sister and I were out of school. My mom wasn't teaching. We would talk about going to Disney from the time we landed home from the last trip until the plane ride for the next trip

Scott

You mentioned that you got what you call the vacation planning videos in the mail?

Tricia

Yes.

Scott

I'm not familiar with that. What is that? Is that something Disney sends out?

Tricia

Yes. This was so normal for my sister and I. Then, as we talked about it, as we got older, it is very unique to us. I'm guessing Disney World's marketing team would make these 30-40 minute advertisements around, "Come to Disney World. Here's what you can do." And they were well-produced. They would talk about the different hotels and the different parks where you could eat. At the time, I believe my dad would order them through travel agents. We would get them sent to the house and we would watch them as a family. At one point, we must have had dozens of these VHS tapes that we would just put in to watch at dinner. So this is kind of crazy. He would play games with my sister and I, like a quiz where he would say, "You're standing in front of the castle. How do you get to Space Mountain?" And my sister and I would say, "Oh, you go this way, this way, this way. This is the best possible route to get to a particular ride." He just always wanted to relive what it was like to be there.

Scott

Did you just go to the Magic Kingdom in Disney World or did you go to the other places like Epcot and some of the others?

Tricia

We did. So we went to Magic Kingdom, Epcot, MGM Studios - which is now Hollywood Studios and later Typhoon Lagoon when they made that water park - and Animal Kingdom. But our favorites were definitely Magic Kingdom. Polynesian Hotel was the hotel that my parents wanted us to stay at most frequently. Now, it's outrageous in pricing, but we were able to make it work years ago. Epcot was another big one that we loved.

Scott

Can you talk about your dad's health as it began to decline?

Tricia

He is half-Italian and has a large appetite to kind of prove it - we all do. He developed diabetes when I was little. I don't remember how old I was. When I think of my dad, I always remembered him being diabetic and he would inject insulin, but he wouldn't make any lifestyle changes. When I mentioned that he had a tough upbringing, his dad - my grandfather - was an alcoholic and a pretty violent one. I think that my grandfather's alcoholism may have been passed down in a sense as a substance abuse disorder for my dad, and that drug for my dad was food. So it made him happy. It may have triggered some type of endorphins or dulled pain, and that was the way that he liked to share conversations with people - over food. His own form of entertainment was over food. His health continued to decline with his diabetes into my twenties. Eventually, he needed a kidney transplant. He refused to take a kidney from me, my sister, or my mother. He wouldn't let any of us get tested.

Scott

Because you and Heather were both adults now, right?

Tricia

Yes.

Scott

So if you were a match, you could have donated.

Tricia

Yeah, absolutely. We would have donated, but there were two reasons why he refused. One was because he was afraid if something ever happened to my sister or me, and we needed both of our kidneys, he did not want to put us in any type of jeopardy. The other reason was that he wasn't going to change. So why take a kidney that he was going to waste, for lack of a better phrasing? That was hard to kind of watch your parent make that decision just knowing that he was going to live out his life his way - all of the medical trauma that went along with it.

Scott

It's tough being on a kidney waiting list because you just never know if you may get one soon. You may never get one. How long was he on that list?

Tricia

Months. He was on dialysis for months. Dialysis is difficult because he would spend the day at a dialysis clinic and he would be exhausted for a couple of days after. Then, as he started to feel better, it was time for him to go back to dialysis. It's wild to think that it was his choice. He wasn't the type to listen to reason around this. I think he was a complicated individual. So, one evening, he went out to dinner with my mom - I can't remember if my sister was with them or if she was out. I know I was home. I still lived with my parents. I got a phone call at the house and it was a hospital - their hospital. They said, "We have a kidney for Paul - my dad - and it was through a cadaver donation." So this individual chose to donate their kidney and it matched my father in their database. So they gave a call and I answered, thank goodness. I was clueless because I said, "Oh, my dad's out. He'll be back later." The person on the phone said, "You need to get your dad right now and get him to the hospital." That's when it hit me. I called the restaurant and I got ahold of my family. They came home because it was before cell phones. Well, it wasn't quite before cell phones - it was definitely a time when it was less common to have a cell phone on you all the time.

Scott

So you had to call the restaurant and get their attention that way?

Tricia

I did. Then they had to leave and come right home to get - I think they got, like, a change of clothes and said goodbye to me and my sister. My dad was a great dad. He did the best he could and he wasn't a very "I love you" type of dad, wasn't a big hugger, and that sort of thing. So I remember him in the car and me at the window of the car saying, "I love you." And his reply was, "Okay." That's how I knew he was going to survive that transplant because if he said, "I love you" back I knew something else was going on, but he just very matter-of-factly said, "Okay." And I said, "All right, he's going to be okay."

Scott

It's just funny hearing that interaction and that dialogue because if you say I love you and they respond with "Okay", some people would be offended or insulted. But you knew your dad. You knew it was the way he was.

Tricia

Yeah. It calmed me down. So he got the kidney and it worked beautifully, and he still wouldn't change anything about his lifestyle no matter what we did or said to him. He was stubborn. I mean, we stopped buying him cigarettes once and he would still go out and get them himself. When I would run errands or something, he would say, "Oh, get me a pack of Larks on your way back." I would do it and we stopped. We all made the commitment not to do it to try to help him quit, and it didn't matter. He was going to go out himself and get them then. Because he is a diabetic, he attempted to make maybe very minor changes but, in the end, his diabetes took his right leg. So he had an amputation and he had neuropathy, which is something that causes weakness and numbness in his limbs. So instead of using a prosthetic limb, he had to use a wheelchair or a scooter. Then, it started getting more difficult for him because we were from Massachusetts. The winters were really hard on him and he loves the sun, so he really wanted to go to Disney World more and more consistently as his health declined.

Scott

Was he still able to keep working at this time?

Tricia

He worked for as long as he could. Then, between the kidney transplant and then the loss of his limb, he had to stop working. He tried to partner with a travel agent because he knew so much about Disney. He thought he could be helpful in arranging vacations for other people. Unfortunately, that didn't work out because his neuropathy would make it difficult for him to type sometimes. So he had difficulty with mobility and he had difficulty typing but, if he wanted something, he would still get it. So he could order his own food if he wanted to eat something. He would order it to the house. He would take his scooter down to a convenience store at the end of our— we lived on a very busy street. He would take his scooter down to the convenience store and he would knock on their window and they agreed to give him his cigarettes and bring out his change because it wasn't wheelchair accessible. He basically said, "Your store isn't wheelchair accessible, but it's fine by me. I won't make a big deal to the city. When I come knocking, give me a couple of packs of Larks. Here's the money. Here's the change." So they would do a deal on the sidewalk of the convenience store. That's how stubborn he was - almost like, "I dare you to try and change who I am." It was really frustrating.

At some point, we just decided to accept that. This is how he was going to live his life and we didn't want to isolate ourselves from the relationship we had with him. Like, tough love didn't work. So my mom, my sister, and I just— it was tough, but we did our best.

Scott

I'm just trying to put myself in your shoes. I mean, your frustration— you see him and his health declining and it was as if he didn't care about it or as if he didn't want to live long enough to stay with his family longer. That had to just be terrible for you to try to deal with.

Tricia

It was. It really was. And for his siblings. He's one of four and they also tried to intervene. It's difficult to articulate to those who haven't met him, but that's Paul. It was either love him as he is or turn your back on him. My family wasn't going to do that, so we kind of watched him self-medicate. We did our best to love him and we did our best to get him to Disney as often as we could.

Scott

Did you ever ask him, "Dad, don't you want to keep living? Don't you want to stay with us?"

Tricia

I did. I did get up the courage. He was very vocal that he was going to live his life the way he wanted to live his life, and that hurt. I think something deeper was going on with his mental health. At one point, I did come to the radical acceptance of, "He's not going to live long enough to see my sister and I get married, or my sister start a family." So I asked him half-jokingly, "Dad, what do you want us to do when you pass?" He responded, kind of, half-jokingly. He said, "Cremate me and throw me in Disney World." I said, "Okay." I knew that's what he wanted and his answer didn't surprise me.

Scott

Yeah, you could have predicted that, I'm sure.

Tricia

Yeah, very much.

Scott

So he ended up spending more and more time in Florida.

Tricia

He did. He decided to spend most of the winter in Florida at an extended-stay hotel, which was near Disney property. He would've loved to have moved down there. There were a lot of pieces to that though. My mom was a teacher, so she would need to get licensed in the state of Florida in order to continue teaching music. She would need to quit her band and she would need to leave her own support system because, with my dad being unable to work, she was both the primary breadwinner and also a primary caretaker of my dad. My sister and I helped. My mom was his partner physically, emotionally, and mentally, and to ask her to then relocate was just too much. So, the plan for that winter was for my dad to go to Florida and then my mom would visit him on her winter break from school. So this was kind of the first test of, "Here's where we can spend the winter and we'll see how it goes."

Scott

And he was mobile enough and could take care of himself enough to get by on his own, being in Florida by himself...

Tricia

Yes. So I took the initial trip down to make sure that his flight down was comfortable. I got him set up for the extended stay. I made friends with the hotel staff so they understood who my dad was. He had contacts with a visiting nurse association, so he had everything that he needed to be well while he was there. Of course, our family was in constant contact with him daily. As long as he had his cigarettes and his scooter, he was the happiest you'd ever see him.

Scott

And then your mom came to visit...

Tricia

Yeah, she visited at the extended stay, and then they decided to book a room for a night or two at the Polynesian on Disney property. It was their hotel and they wanted to reconnect and enjoy the park together. They had dinner. Then, later that night, my dad had a heart attack. His body was done.

Scott

Tricia's mom, Christine.

Christine

Well, every time I called him for those three or four weeks he was there in the extended stay, he always sounded winded. He was breathing heavily. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't catch his breath. So I said, "Paul, I'm going to call 911." "No. Wait. It's okay. This happens all the time." So I think he was having the heart attack over the past few weeks. I know he was. Then I finally called him and then his last words to me were, "Christine, I can't breathe." That ring in my mind every day.

Tricia

Looking back, we think he knew and he was holding out for my mom, so we were very grateful that he had my mom with him when it happened - not that you could ever prepare yourself, but we knew that my dad was on borrowed time through his choices, despite our effort. So, 911 was called and my dad was taken to Celebration Hospital. I think Celebration used to be a part of Disney - very close to Disney property. My mom called my sister and I and we immediately flew down to be with our parents. My dad had lost consciousness as a result of the heart attack and never regained it. He was in the hospital for a few days and we were hoping for him to get better, and he never did.

The hospital did scans on his brain and told my mom that he was deprived of oxygen for so long that his brain was permanently damaged and, if he regained consciousness, he would not be able to eat on his own or speak, and would require 24-hour care either at a nursing home or some facility that was equipped to deal with his needs. So my mom had to break this news to my sister and I'll never forget it because we were standing in the hallway - my mom, my sister, and I were in a little bit of a circle. My mom was explaining to us what the doctors told her and what my dad's life would look like if he regained consciousness. My mom and I went quiet. I was processing the news internally. I think my mom was too.

My sister, who is an incredibly gentle soul - she's not assertive - said in the most firm voice I have ever heard out of her mouth with so much conviction, "No." My mom and I like snapped out of it and said, "You're right. No, he wouldn't want that at all. He wanted his freedom. He lived the way he wanted to live no matter what. So my mom contacted a priest. My family is Catholic. They gave my dad his last rites. He was removed from life support and he passed away at age 52.

Scott

So young...

Tricia

So young. I'm 40 now. As I get older, it blows my mind just how young my dad was when he passed. It's very sad.

Scott

Yeah. 52 is hardly middle-aged.

Tricia

Hardly. Yeah. Unbelievable.

Scott

Now, you, your mom, and Heather were in Florida. You mentioned that you weren't quite fully grieving yet at that time. Why not? What was going on there?

Tricia

We went into, like, a logistics mode. I think we suddenly felt like we were on another planet. It was very much, "Okay, what do we do now?" The fact that he was truly gone did not hit us for quite some time.

Scott

Just because there were a lot of details you had to take care of.

Tricia

Yes. We were at the extended stay hotel. My mom and dad had their reservation at the Polynesian, and then that ended. My dad made friends with the hotel staff and they became fond of him, which was very easy to do. They transferred the reservation to my mom and we all stayed in his room to handle these next steps because we were truly at a loss of, "What do we do now?" So, we started to donate his clothing, his scooter, and things that we couldn't ship back or we wouldn't ship back with us. Like, what do you do? We just went robotic.

The hospital went into the next-step mode as well because they wanted to know what to do with my dad. My mom had him cremated. I remember we were in the hotel room when the crematory director knocked on the door. He got a box in his hands and came into the room. There was a table in the hotel rooms. He pulled out this bag of ash and went, "Here's Paul." And he popped it on the table in a hotel room in Florida, turned on his heel, and walked out. That was it. My mom and my sister looked at each other like we were on some kind of hidden camera TV show. It all happened over the course of a couple of days and, now, here we are. My mom and I locked eyes and she said, "What are we going to do?" I said, "We scatter them in Disney."

Scott

People that are listening to this right now just got a big smile because they know what's coming.

Tricia

They know what's coming.

Scott

So you're talking about logistics?

Tricia

Yeah.

Scott

Obviously, Disney does not allow this.

Tricia

No.

Scott

And you had to figure out how to do it anyway.

Tricia

Yes.

Scott

What's your plan?

Tricia

At that time, Magic Kingdom. When my family thinks of Disney, we think of the Magic Kingdom, which is Disney's main park. That's the one with the castle and that location. I think they all do, but that one definitely at that time did bag searches. They have since added metal detectors. Back then, it was just bag searches upon entry. I knew we can't just bring a bag of ash into the park, so it's also a bit of a dark Disney secret that people have scattered ashes before. So we weren't going to be the first. I was thinking that, maybe, they were expecting us to act a certain way. Like, I didn't want to act shady and draw attention.

We didn't have a car, but the extended stay was on a main road and we could walk to a gift shop. I had the idea of walking to a gift shop and buying one of those metal water bottles, so you couldn't see the contents. Presumably, the cast members who would search the bag would just assume that it was a water bottle and not some kind of defacto urn. So we did that. We got a water bottle and went back to the hotel. I was at the hotel room's table pouring ashes into the bottle. I thought it would be like pouring sand, but no. It is quite messy. So now I was wiping my dad off the hotel room table like toast crumbs and kind of brushing my hands together over the bottle to get all of this ash in thinking like, "What is this? What are we doing?" Still, grief hasn't hit. It's just like I'm in Operation Scatter Ashes in Disney.

I put the bottle of ash in my bag. We got tickets to go to the Magic Kingdom. We were walking to the security entry and I got anxious. I thought, "I might get caught. I might go to Disney jail - which is an actual thing. Maybe we would get caught and banned in perpetuity from all of these parks." So we got to a section where you get checked if you got a bag. If you don't have a bag, you don't get checked. So my mom and my sister went through and I'm the one getting checked.

Scott

I just have to say this. This feels like a scene from Locked Up Abroad where somebody's trying to get through airport security and they know they've got a little bag of cocaine in one of their carry-ons or something,

Tricia

Yes. I was terrified. If they had found it, I was playing through my head, "What are they going to say?" "Hey, what is this?" What do I say and what do I do? So all of this was going through my head and I could barely hear what the security person was saying. They opened your bag. They kind of do a little rifling through. I was looking at the water bottle the whole time thinking, "Do they open it just to make sure there's no alcohol in it or is there a protocol I wasn't aware of?" They took a look and they kind of slid it by and said, "Okay, go ahead. And we were in."

Scott

It may have come down to which particular agent you happen to go through but, I'm sure most of the time, they see so many bags and bottles and everything come through all day and they've got a long line of people they've got to deal with. I think that played to your advantage.

Tricia

Yeah, I think the crowd was definitely on our side. We got through. Now, we feel like we're completely on another planet. I remember everything that I looked at seemed to have a haze over it and I felt like I was walking through jello and it wasn't just the Florida humidity. It was a very strange feeling. Our emotions had not caught up to us. Dad's gone, but it still doesn't feel like he's gone. We're at the Magic Kingdom, but my dad's not at the Magic Kingdom. We're about to scatter ashes - like, so otherworldly. We went directly to the restrooms as, like, our first stop to kind of collect ourselves. So we got Dad through, but we haven't scattered anything yet. I was worried that if we were just standing around pouring ashes into our hands out in the open, it would definitely draw attention. So, in the bathroom stall, I opened up the bottle and I was like, "You get some ash and you get some ash." So I poured ashes into my hand, my sister's hand, and my mother's hand, and we clenched our fists. We would carry his ashes in our clenched fists to ride number one, which was the Carousel of Progress. My dad's favorite rides were the Carousel of Progress, Space Mountain, Peter Pan's Flight and, fittingly, the Haunted Mansion. Then, his favorite hotel was the Polynesian. So these were the places that we intended to go.

Scott

You had your agenda.

Tricia

We had the agenda.

Scott

Can you describe the carousel of progress for people who haven't been there?

Tricia

Yeah, absolutely. Think of it like a movie theater but, instead of a screen, it's a stage that has animatronic characters and the stage moves around the characters. So, the only place to scatter ashes inside would be on the theater floor, which felt really rude. So, instead, we chose to scatter in the flower beds that are out in front of the ride.

Scott

So that's kind of out in the open?

Tricia

Very much so. Oh yes. Anyone could see. My mom did a very obvious look around and, like, tossed a handful like she was feeding pigeons. I remember scream-whisper, "Mom! That's too obvious!" So I had to demonstrate, like, "Just look at the flowers and then just open your hand and let it go." So I did it, and then my sister did it and it was like, "Okay, first ride down. Let's go back to the restrooms and then put more ash in our hands." That's the way that it went between each ride. We would go somewhere like a restroom and grab more ash. So that's for the carousel of progress. Then, a very short distance away is Space Mountain, which is a rollercoaster in the dark - completely indoors and pitch black - so I thought, "Oh, this is good. This will be less likely to draw attention."

It's a three-people seat in a coaster cart. It's kind of like a bobsled. You're seated one behind the other. So me, my mom, and my sister can all sit in the same cart. Then, it was my turn to get too comfortable because we were going down this hill and the ride is very quick as a rollercoaster. I kind of tossed exuberantly the ash because, now, I'm feeling like, "Oh, this is for my dad" and tossed. I got an entire face full of ash blown back at me. And that's when I laugh and then I start to cry because my dad would have loved to have seen that. That would've tickled him very much.

Scott

And he was there when it happened.

Tricia

Yeah. Yes, he was.

Scott

So then it was onto Peter Pan's Flight.

Tricia

Yes. Peter Pan's Flight. So you sit in a boat - that's what your cart looks like. It's suspended from this ceiling. If you look down, you see London - because Peter Pan takes place in London - and it was beautiful. That one was easy. We just kind of held our hands over the side of the boat and kind of gently opened them and the ash hit the floor. Then, we started walking over to the haunted mansion. This is the strongest memory that my mom, my sister, and I have. As we're walking over - the Haunted mansion is on the other side of the park - this parade seemingly started all around us. I can't really articulate it but it was as if my ears were blocked and suddenly unblocked. I looked around and there was this parade happening. Parades happen throughout the day at the Magic Kingdom, but never before have I seen this particular parade. Characters are singing and dancing on a float. The song that they're singing and dancing is Shake A Tail Feather by Ray Charles, which was a favorite of my dad's. My dad loved the movie The Blues Brothers, and it includes Ray Charles singing that song. We all felt something. We all felt my dad. We all looked at each other and we knew something is happening. It felt like he was all around us.

I mentioned that my family is Catholic. I'm an atheist. I share that because we all felt something. So, my atheism, which is not a disbelief in a God or Gods, it's important that I share that I just lack a belief in a God or God. I hope I'm wrong. I'd love to see my dad again but it added an additional struggle to my grief. If I believed in heaven, I could believe that my dad is in a better place or, maybe, he's reunited with loved ones or that I'd see him again, but I don't. But to feel that moment— never before have I felt something like that that comforted me and let me know that my dad is around us, he's okay, and he's free now.

Scott

So you felt that and it didn't necessarily need to be a religious thing for you, but it could be spiritual. Is that how you would describe that, you think?

Tricia

Yeah, I would agree with that. I do believe that energy has to go somewhere and maybe that's where my dad's energy ended up. It was a really good moment. So the Haunted Mansion is another dark ride. It's a haunted house. Instead of walking through it, you sit in a buggy and it takes you through this haunted house. Because it's all dark, we felt that we wouldn't be seen, but the reality is that the Magic Kingdom

has video everywhere and they can see visitors in dark rides. They can see you everywhere. So we did the thing where we kind of put our arms over the side of the buggy and sprinkled. There's a cemetery scene in the ride and that's what felt to be most appropriate. So we sprinkled him in the cemetery. I don't mean to kind of dismiss this, but I am a realist and I knew that he was probably vacuumed up that night, but it didn't matter. Nothing could capture or take away what we did that day for him. Nothing could take away the peace that it brought to all of us and just the silly kind of adventure. That was how we memorialized my dad.

Scott

Yeah, it seems like the perfect way to honor him. So you had one spot left.

Tricia

Yeah, we did. So we took the monorail, which is a suspended subway of sorts that will travel from the Magic Kingdom to a few other places - one of them being the Polynesian, which was my parents' place. So, it was night at this time and we walked towards the lake. It's called Bay Lake. It's got sand. Today, you can't reach the water but you could stand in it if you wanted to. We kind of tossed ash in the water and mixed it into the sand. We were looking at the castle across the water and it's like, dad everywhere. It was good. It was a good ending to all of that. We didn't have a funeral. My dad didn't want one. What we did that day was exactly what he would've wanted. My mom got to spend time with my dad at their place - the happiest place on earth for them. As the rest of the moments unfolded from letting my dad go to then honoring him with how we kind of snuck him into the park, it bonded my mom, my sister, and I. It's probably not surprising that we share a gallows humor together, so we were able to laugh and create our own peace, honor my dad, and then surround my mom in comfort. It was a really beautiful experience.

Scott

It sounds so much better than a formal funeral service. It just sounds more appropriate for him.

Tricia

Yes. Yeah, for us, it was. I think it was so important for us to listen to my dad because he always said who he was. He never tried to be anything other than Paul. He would drive you crazy being Paul, but you couldn't help but adore him and be able to give him that last honor of, "We see you. We know what you want. We're going to make it happen no matter what it takes." And yeah, to your point, it was the most appropriate way to say goodbye.

Scott

Once again, Tricia's mom...

Tricia

I felt exuberant because I was doing his wishes. It didn't feel weird. I mean, I felt a little funny when I was trying to do it because I was sure that someone was going to arrest me and say, "Okay, you're going to be in prison for life for doing this." But no. I felt released. I felt like I was doing his wishes and I knew he was happy with it. I knew it and we did the right thing. I do want to go back again, but I'd like to go back to a different hotel and I want to revisit it a different way so that I can still remember him, but remember him and show him the new Disney in my heart.

Scott

Have you been back to Disney World since then?

Tricia

Yes, both my husband and I. We actually honeymooned there ourselves. I've been back with just me and my mom on girls' trips. Me, my mom, and my sister have been back as a family as well.

Scott

It continues to be a family tradition, it sounds like.

Tricia

Yeah. In a way, it's how we visit my dad, which sounds silly in a way saying it out loud, but that's where he is. That's where we feel him the most. That's where we have our best memories. So, as much as it is just a fun place to spend time and have a vacation, it does have a deeper meaning for my mom and my sister. We get to revisit my dad anywhere we go on the property.

Scott

And you don't have to go to a cemetery to do that.

Tricia

No.

Scott

We didn't plan this - you and I - but you've told me that, as we record this, today is your dad's birthday.

Tricia

It is. It is so wild how it worked out, but he would've been 66 years old today.

Scott

What's your favorite memory of your dad?

Tricia

He would make up his own song lyrics. I mentioned how much my dad loved the Aladdin soundtrack. There was a line that was "Prince Ali! Fabulous he, Ali Ababwa." So instead of saying that he would sing - and this is out loud around the house, in the car, or wherever - "Prince Ali fabulously, look at his outfit." Like he would just make up silly lyrics. He would have our family in stitches. When we talk about my dad, we'll sing his songs instead of the actual lyrics because he had so many for all these different songs. What endears me beyond that is my husband does the same thing and they never met. So it's kind of like it's special.

Scott

That's so interesting. I'm sure you've heard this phrase that a daughter marries her father. That sounds like it's come true in your situation.

Tricia

Yes, I think so. I think my husband and my dad would've been best friends. All of the wonderful characteristics that my dad has, I see it in my husband. My sister is married. She got a six-year-old daughter and her husband possesses a lot of certainly the hardworking qualities that my dad had. So it's like we get to live in our own relationships aspects of our dad. It's been really nice.

Scott

What's your reason for wanting to share this story of your dad?

Tricia

I wanted to share it because there isn't a normal way or a standard way to memorialize someone or to grieve, and I think this is kind of an oddball one. So it gives me the opportunity to share a unique story, and our actions brought us so much comfort in our grief. My hope is that, if anything, people can relate to this and feel like they can grieve and memorialize someone in their own way as well.

Scott

If you'd like to see some of Tricia's family pictures with her parents at Disney World, those are in the show notes at WhatWasThatLike.com/139

You might be surprised at how many people sprinkle the ashes of their loved ones at Disney. It happens pretty regularly. But if you've ever been to Disney World, you didn't notice it. That's because Disney is very much aware that this happens, and they are on top of cleaning things up. They even have special vacuums they use for this, so it doesn't affect anyone's experience at any of the parks. So millions of people keep going there, and they love it, because it really is the happiest place on earth.

I have a couple of things I want to share with you. Earlier this week, we celebrated Mother's Day. If you're a mother, I hope you had an amazing day with your family or your friends.

But you might be listening to this right now, and you're a mother who's struggling. If you have a teenager, you might be having a really difficult time, and Mother's Day maybe wasn't so great, because of the tension in that parent/teenager relationship. It might seem like life is just one battle after another with your child. Of course you love them, but you might feel really stressed out by the constant fight.

Well, I have something for you today. This is just for you. Take a few minutes and listen to *The Letter Your Teenager Can't Write you*.

(The Letter Your Teenager Can't Write You)

Dear Parent:

This is the letter I wish I could write.

This fight we are in right now. I need it. I need this fight. I can't tell you this because I don't have the language for it and it wouldn't make sense anyway. But I need this fight. Badly. I need to hate you right now and I need you to survive it. I need you to survive my hating you and you hating me. I need this fight even though I hate it too. It doesn't matter what this fight is even about: curfew, homework, laundry, my messy room, going out, staying in, leaving, not leaving, boyfriend, girlfriend, no friends, bad friends. It doesn't matter. I need to fight you on it and I need you to fight me back.

I desperately need you to hold the other end of the rope. To hang on tightly while I thrash on the other end—while I find the handholds and footholds in this new world I feel like I am in. I used to know who I was, who you were, who we were. But right now I don't. Right now I am looking for my edges and I can

sometimes only find them when I am pulling on you. When I push everything I used to know to its edge. Then I feel like I exist and for a minute I can breathe. I know you long for the sweeter kid that I was. I know this because I long for that kid too, and some of that longing is what is so painful for me right now.

I need this fight and I need to see that no matter how bad or big my feelings are—they won't destroy you or me. I need you to love me even at my worst, even when it looks like I don't love you. I need you to love yourself and me for the both of us right now. I know it sucks to be disliked and labeled the bad guy. I feel the same way on the inside, but I need you to tolerate it and get other grownups to help you. Because I can't right now. If you want to get all of your grown up friends together and have a 'surviving-your-teenager-support-group-rage-fest' that's fine with me. Or talk about me behind my back--I don't care. Just don't give up on me. Don't give up on this fight. I need it.

This is the fight that will teach me that my shadow is not bigger than my light. This is the fight that will teach me that bad feelings don't mean the end of a relationship. This is the fight that will teach me how to listen to myself, even when it might disappoint others.

And this particular fight will end. Like any storm, it will blow over. And I will forget and you will forget. And then it will come back. And I will need you to hang on to the rope again. I will need this over and over for years. I know there is nothing inherently satisfying in this job for you. I know I will likely never thank you for it or even acknowledge your side of it. In fact I will probably criticize you for all this hard work. It will seem like nothing you do will be enough. And yet, I am relying entirely on your ability to stay in this fight. No matter how much I argue. No matter how much I sulk. No matter how silent I get.

Please hang on to the other end of the rope. And know that you are doing the most important job that anyone could possibly be doing for me right now.

Love, Your Teenager

Scott

Hang in there moms. And dads too.

And I also got this voice mail from Russell, with more appreciation for the moms -

Russell

Thank you, Scott. Russell here. I've been binging on "What Was That Like" for the past month. Though many of your episodes are perspective-changing, what rattled my brain the most was the firsthand account of giving birth. It shows a light on how this otherwise beautiful miracle life can be scary, intensely misunderstood, and ironically deadly. With Mother's Day just around the corner. I want to leave a message of gratitude to all the moms listening, especially my own Mother, Ann and my partner Kristen, Happiest Mother's Day.

Scott

Graphics for this episode were created by Bob Bretz.

Full episode transcription was created by James Lai.

The Letter Your Teenager Can't Write You was originally written by Gretchen Schmelzer. It was read for us today by Elle Ray James. If you need a voiceover artist, you can hear samples of their work online – there's a link to that in the show notes.

And now, this week's Listener Story! It's how we end every episode. I'll bet you have a story you can tell in about 5-10 minutes, and if you do, record it on your phone and email it to me – Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com.

This one is about a mom who had to perform CPR on her daughter. And I'm gonna go ahead with the spoiler so you don't have to worry about listening to it – it has a happy ending.

Stay safe, and I'll see you in two weeks.

(Listener story)

To give you a little background, my husband, Keith and I were 42 at the time this happened. Our daughter was almost six. I am a licensed practical nurse and was working in a clinic at the time. My husband is a maintenance worker employed in a foundry. We had a hard time getting pregnant and were only able to have one child. We lived in Minnesota and it was a very warm Sunday afternoon in August. We were all outside cooling off in the above-ground pool we had put up for the summer. It wasn't very large or deep, but we still had a lot of fun in it. I took a break to sit on the patio and relax about 15 to 20 feet from the pool, and Keith had gone inside to use the bathroom. Neither one of us was drinking alcohol and we don't use drugs.

Our daughter stayed in the pool doing her favorite activity - diving for toys that sink to the bottom. She would go down and gather all of them and ask us to throw them again while she closed her eyes so that she couldn't see where they landed. Keith came back outside and we started talking. It was less than a minute later when he asked me where she was. Since he couldn't see or hear her, I said she was going down for dive sticks and we started talking again. It was only another minute when we realized it had been too long, so he ran to the pool and saw her lying on the bottom. Somehow he was able to reach over the pool, grab her suit, and pull her out. We still have no idea how this happened, but are so grateful that he was able to do this.

Immediately I ran over to where he put her - on the grass - and saw that her lips were blue and she wasn't breathing. Being a nurse since I was 20 years old, I have taken many CPR classes and have done it on people, but they were patients in a nursing home, not our child, and I had others with me to help. I forgot all of my training and was at a loss as to what I should do. I started praying and screaming to call 911, but we couldn't find a cell phone. We later found it under a towel. Keith did eventually find a phone and they almost sent a helicopter to come to help us, but it turned out that it wasn't needed because it was hot. Our neighbors had their windows closed with air conditioning on and didn't see us or hear us, even though they were all home - our houses are close together. I started praying again and doing rescue breathing, not even thinking to feel for a pulse. After a few breaths, nothing was happening. So, I started chest compressions. After about 20 to 30 seconds, she started coughing and throwing up a bit. It was at that time that the first responders came running around the back of the house to help. She was conscious by this point, but not responding. I'll never forget the way this kind man instructed us to get changed and grab some clothes and shoes for her along with her favorite toy or blanket while they got her loaded.

We made sure our pets were inside and locked up our house while we were headed to the hospital. The paramedics, at first, wanted Keith in with her since he was calming her down once she came to, as she was hysterical, and they told me to drive by myself the 30 minutes to the closest hospital. The driver heard this and said I was going to ride up front with him since our town was completely under road construction and he didn't know the back road, so that is what I did. I immediately called my family as they only live a couple of blocks away and they are also headed to the hospital. Our small town has a siren that blows for emergencies, so they had heard the siren but had no idea it was for her.

We got to the emergency room and there was a discussion of flying her to a bigger hospital, but one doctor said she was comfortable keeping her local. She does have a history of asthma and that had concerned them. She spent the night in the pediatric intensive care unit and had her own private nurse. Once she got to the floor, the nurses fought over who got to give her a new American girl doll as hundreds were donated to girls her age. She quickly learned how to use the adjustable bed and call light and thought they were the best thing ever.

I drove back home to get clothes for us because she said I would know where to find things before Dad would. When I came back, she was showing off her new skills with the bed and call light. By 2 o'clock in the morning, she was done sleeping, so the nurse took her to the nurse's station to play games so we could sleep. We went home that morning. The next day, she and I and the neighbor girls went back into the pool. I told her she couldn't live her life in fear and - she loved swimming - she agreed. She did wear a life jacket for the first few minutes, and I was right by her side.

Now, I bet you're wondering what happened. It turns out that she started twirling ballerina style, got dizzy, and fell. They told us a child will instantly panic when they go underwater by accident, and they think that is what happened. The water was not over her head. She could swim and was very comfortable around water. A month later, we put her in private swim lessons at age 6. She started out in level 2. By spring, she completed all of them except lifeguard training that she was too young for. Remember, she was only 6. She still loves swimming but gets nervous when the water is over 8 feet. We did a lot of praying and I really struggled with guilt as I was alone outside and should have been watching her better. While she was in the ICU, I asked Keith if he and I were okay. He said we both should have been watching her and we both saved her and that we were just fine. He and I are not ones to fight, and we weren't going to start then.