





FAMILY SECRETS

By Daniel J. Siegel

Family secrets. Every family has them, those stories that only the select few know. It could be about an ostracized relative, or one who spent or is spending time behind bars, or something worse. On the other hand, we all probably have other secrets that are not really secrets, they are more aptly described as untold stories we had hoped more people knew.

Certainly my family is no exception. I have written, for example, about my sister Marsha, who was one of the models for the famous “Coppertone girl” logo. And my family has other stories. My father had a secret so secret that he never even told me until I

was in college. He was ashamed of that secret, yet now that I – and so many others – know it, we can only wonder why.

My dad, Bert, was born in North Philadelphia in 1917, the son of immigrants who ran a corner grocery store. Like so

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many children at that time, Dad was delivered by a midwife. Apparently something went wrong. No one knows what happened. The result is the reason for this story.

It seems that from birth, my dad, who was right-handed, could not move the middle, ring and pinky fingers on that hand. He could not even straighten those fingers, and was left with three permanently “curved” and “crippled” fingers. As a result, he could not wear gloves or shuffle a deck of cards, and he hated to shake hands because the other person might notice that Dad’s hand was mostly curled up.

Dad never knew how to use his hand any other way. Instead, he just took for granted that he was born “that way,” and went about his business. It simply never occurred to him that his hand was or would be a problem.

Although he was a math whiz, and had thought about becoming a teacher, my father decided to be a dentist, realizing that the quotas so common in the 1930s would likely preclude his acceptance into medical school. He was accepted into Temple University School of Dentistry, going to school and helping in the store when he could. Yes, this man who could only use his thumb and forefinger on his dominant hand had decided to become a dentist – a career that required manual dexterity.

And a dentist he became. Dad was an excellent student, did quite well in dental school, and no one noticed or knew about his “secret.” He graduated in 1941 and went into private practice just one block from the corner where he was born and raised. He was the neighborhood kid who became the neighborhood dentist, and no one had a clue about his secret.

This was also during World War II, when most men my dad’s age either enlisted or were drafted. Dad, despite being engaged to my mother, and despite starting his career, was no different. He wanted to fight in the war. But it was not to be.

To fight, or to be accepted into the military, a soldier had to be able to fire a rifle. If you can not use your three fingers you can not fire a rifle or pistol; and you can not join your friends and classmates in the military. Dad was rejected, and made excuses. He never explained, however, that his hand was the problem.

After being excluded from the military, Dad continued practicing dentistry and raising our family. His hand was merely an irrelevance. He was a supremely gentle dentist, whose touch was so light that when patients closed their eyes, they would not even realize he was caring for them. I cannot remember any patient complaining about the care they received. Patients loved my dad and never had an inkling that he filled their teeth, cleaned their teeth, and did all the other things dentists did, all with just two fingers.

Dad never told me about his hand until I was in college. Why he eventually told me was unclear, but I still remember how ashamed he seemed of this result of his birth, and I never could fathom the reason. He was a caring and gentle man, who was loved by his family, friends and patients and, despite his embarrassment, no one would have thought less of him if they had known about his fingers.

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Eventually Dad retired and needed a hobby. After all, if he did not have a hobby, my mom would have “killed” him. So Dad, who used to make jewelry from scrap gold, decided to do sculpture, and began to take courses at the local adult school, and also at a local evening art school. His sculpture was superb. What Dad accomplished with two fingers and a brick of clay, most of us could never do with five healthy fingers.

Dad created numerous pieces. While some were modern, most were busts. Some were busts of people’s heads, and others were, shall we say, busts of busts. There was no doubt that Dad loved the female form.

Dad was prolific, and my parents’ house was filled with his creations, many of which were comparable to the works of professionals. He was proud of his work, but never shared the fact that he accomplished these results with two fingers.

In 2001, at age 83, Dad left us after a short illness. But he never really left us, because his sculpture remained, and it filled my childhood home, and remained very much a living tribute to him. My mom never learned to live without her dear Bert and passed away three years later, and was even buried on Dad’s Yahrzeit, the anniversary of a person’s death on the Jewish calendar.

Dad remains with us. My home and my office are filled with many of his finest works. When you walk into my home, Dad’s two best pieces greet you. They are two busts so real you expect them to begin speaking. And because Dad was a diehard sports fan (especially baseball), it hardly seems coincidental that one sculpture looks like Phillie Phanatic Hall of Fame player and announcer Richie Ashburn. Of course, another of his best pieces looks as if Phillie Phanatic Hall of Fame third baseman Mike Schmidt sat for it.

Many more pieces are still on display throughout my home and my office. While I have not brought the “busts” to work – after all, naked breasts might raise some questions – I regularly receive compliments about the sculpture, with clients and others regularly asking who is the artist who created these



Dr. Bert Siegel

beautiful works.

Until his death, Dad refused to tell anyone about his hand. I still remember one night when Dad was playing in his monthly poker game, which included some doctors and dentists. One of the players, an orthopedic surgeon, watched as Dad shuffled the cards with his unorthodox “sidearm” style. He called my father aside, explained that he noticed my Dad’s hand, and even offered a diagnosis. Dad thanked him and asked that he never mention his hand again. Nothing more was ever said.

Dad left us more than a decade ago, yet I remain so proud that I can tell the world how much he was able to accomplish with two fingers, and that he was able to leave so many pieces of himself for me and my family to share. Everyone has some

limitations, maybe not as unusual as Dad’s, but they are there, and it is far better that we all address those limitations and make the most of them. Dad’s patients never knew, and never cared, that he took care of them with “only” two fingers. While it took nearly 20 years, I am glad that he didn’t take this “family secret” to his grave. To me, that secret is an even bigger reason to enjoy and appreciate Dad’s artistic talents. ■

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