

Sam Houston Writing Project

My Sister's Keeper

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"Let's play," Ann said, as soon as I stormed through the front door.

"Not today, I don't ever want to play this stupid game with you again!" I snapped, as I slapped the game out of her hand, continuing down the hall to my bedroom, slamming the door behind me. Feeling sick to my stomach for treating my sister that way, because of some stupid kids.

I remember that day as if it happened yesterday. My sister Ann, is older than I am by 8 years. Ann is the oldest in our family. She is also special needs. Growing up in our household, there was always some type of game being played that would, as our parents would say, '*stimulate our brains*'. The game that we played most often was Scrabble, to increase our knowledge of words, according to our parents. We often played this game, right after dinner with our parents. All of us sitting around the kitchen table, often with a bowl of hot buttered popcorn and iced-cold sweet tea, would engage in a challenging game of Scrabble with a twist. When we played a word, our parents would make us define the word and use it in a sentence. During our time playing, my mother would often have Ann occupied with some other activity, until we

finished. Then we would play Ann's version.

Being special needs, Ann only knew how to spell a few three letter words, so her version included letters that did not make up any words. However, she would always call out the words she was 'spelling'. Playing Scrabble became the only game she wanted to play with us growing up. As soon as we would walk through the door, she wanted to be engaged in a game. We would always indulge her and play with her. Every time she spelled her words, she would clap and smile her beautiful smile, proud of the fact that she spelled such a great word. There were times when we would tell her that her word was spelled incorrectly, she would just smile.

My brother, Mitchell was the one who would often tell her that she did not spell a word. He often said, "Why should she be allowed to win with words that don't make any sense?"

Our father responded by saying, "What harm is there in letting her win? Besides, I don't think it is a matter of winning, it just makes her day to play with you guys."

This conversation happened only when my brother could not score a word, because of the placement of the tiles from our sister.

Although, she was the oldest of the four of us, in reality she has always been the youngest one in the family. She was always considered our baby sister because of her disability. Mentally, Ann is presently considered to be between the age of 12 to 13 years. Then she stood about 4 feet tall, petite, with long curly hair that she always wanted in a ponytail and had a smile that could light up a room.

The day I snapped at my sister when I came home from school, was the first time I had ever been short with her. Our parents, I recall, always taught us patience with her. She was in essence, our little princess. I remember laying across my bed, torn between going back out and apologizing to her or just wallowing in my own feelings. I chose to wallow. I was deep in thought when the door to my room opened. My mother walked in, sat on the bed next to me, gently stroking my back.

After a few minutes she spoke, “Hey, Sugar Momma, what’s going on with you today? You know that type of behavior is not tolerated in this house. I will excuse it just this once.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I said.

“Well, just listen. I don’t know what happen, but I cannot help you if you don’t tell me. So, for right now, I want to talk about the way you treated your sister, because you hurt her feelings. Whatever happened today, should not have made you treat her that way and I am disappointed in your behavior. You owe her an apology.”

Before my mother could say anything else, I spoke, “I don’t owe her anything! It is because

of her, that the kids at school laughed at me.”

The stroking of my back stopped and my mother turned me over to speak directly to me.

“Come again?” how is your sister at fault for something that happened to you.

“I don’t want to talk about it!” I said and began to turn over, only to be stopped.

“Sit up, now,” my mother said sternly.

“Now tell me what happened,” she stated.

Before I could open my mouth and say I did not want to talk about it, she said, “I don’t want to hear, *‘I don’t want to talk about it’*. Tell me what happened.”

Sitting there staring at my mother, I knew when I told her what happened she would be as upset, as I was at what was said about my sister. I sat there for a few minutes trying to find a way to say what I had to say, but before I could open my mouth, there was a knock on the door.

“Yes?” my mother called out. My brother opened the door, with downcast eyes.

“What do you need, Mitch?” my mother asked.

“I just wanted to make sure, Sugar Momma is alright, after what happened after school.”

“I’m fine, now leave!” I shouted.

“Dianna Lynn Lawrence watch your tone. What is going on?”

When my mother used our full names, we knew she meant business, so I closed my mouth and glared at my brother. I was thinking how dare he come in and open his mouth.

Looking at me, she stated, “Since you are refusing to tell me what happened,” turning to my brother she demanded, “Mitch tell me, what happened.”

Before he could speak I said, “I will tell you myself.”

When I looked at my brother, I could see the relief on his face. He quickly backed out the room and closed the door.

I turned my head away from my mother and began to speak, “Today in class, Jason said his brother Ernest said Ann was a freak and a retard.” Ernest came over to our house the previous weekend to play with my brother and his friends.

Taking a deep breath, I continued, “He said she belonged in a zoo with all the other animals, and he felt sorry for me for having to live with a retard. And he just kept saying stuff like this all day, then when we were walking home from school, he started all over again and the kids we walk home with were laughing and started in about Ann too. Rodney and Kim, told him to shut up, but he and the other kids just kept making fun of her and us.”

My mother sat there not speaking, I don’t know if she was waiting on me to continue speaking or if she was upset.

I turned to her and said, “I’m sorry.”

Looking at me she replied, “What are you sorry about? You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You didn’t say anything, so I thought you were mad at me.”

“No, Sugar Momma, I am just trying to find the right words for this conversation.”

We both sat there, lost in thought when my mother got up from the bed and walked to the door of my bedroom.

“Lady Bug and Mitch, come in here please.”

She came back and sat down next to me on my bed. My younger sister and brother came in and sat on my sister’s bed, both looking upset.

My mother started softly speaking, “First of all, your sister is not a freak or a retard. Just like the three of you, she was created by the Almighty and He does not make any mistakes. She is one of God’s most precious creations. No one knows why we are created the way we are, we just have to know that everyone, no matter how they were put in this world the way they are for a reason. I believe that your sister was put here in this world, in our family for a reason, she is the heart of this family. Let’s think about all the times any of us have been upset for any reason, who is the one that makes us feel better in some way? It is your sister. She is like a ray of sunshine, for us. How often, she is sad? Or mad? Or cranky about anything? Not often. How many of your friends can say the same about their sibling(s)? Do you think you guys would get along as well as you do, if not for her?”

She looked at each of us, waiting for an answer.

My little sister finally said, “No.”

“So, guys don’t hold your heads down in shame, because of the actions of others.”

Looking directly at me she continued, “You are going to hear a lot of hateful things in your lifetime, but you have to know they are just words and they do not define who you

are. You have to rise above the hate of others. Find something positive in the negative. Sugar Momma, you had friends to come to your aid, these are your true friends, that's a positive. In life, there are people who will try to bring you down, by saying hurtful things, you have to find a way to ignore their hurtful words and not strike back with hurtful words yourself."

Just then the door opened, standing there with the Scrabble game in her hand was my sister, smiling at us, "Let's play."

My mother and brother both turned and looked at me, waiting for my response.

I rose from the bed, walked over to my sister and kissed her cheek, "Let's play."

Ann ran to the table ahead of us. My earlier behavior, had not affected her in the least. Somehow, she knew to give me the space I needed, before coming to ask. *"Let's play"*. It was in that brief moment, I realized how much of a blessing my sister really was to our family. I thought to myself, *"I will protect my sister for as long as I live. I would never be ashamed of who she is, because she is beautiful and I am lucky that God blessed our family with someone as special as her."*

This would be the first of many conversations we would have regarding the intolerance of others and how people view those that are labeled different. We learned early on how to stand up for those who need us most. It has been forty, plus years since that life-changing day in which I made that vow to myself, a vow that I have managed to keep. I have always and continue to be my sisters' keeper; her biggest fan, ally and champion.

It was no surprise when my mother knew she was dying and no longer able to care for my sis-

ter, that she asked me to be my sister's guardian. It was one of the easiest decisions, I had ever made. Little did my mother know that my decision, had been made four decades ago.

My sister, as well as the rest of us, have long since stopped playing Scrabble, however the game is present in all of our homes. It is the game that bonded us as a family and set the stage for one of the most important conversations my mother had with us as children.

Author's Biography

Dianna Green, is a 5th grade teacher at Judson Robinson Elementary School in Houston, Texas. She received her bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice, from the University of Houston-Downtown. She received her teacher certification from Texas Teacher's. She is a certified English/Language Arts/Reading (ELAR) teacher. She is also ESL certified. She has taught grades 3-5 in a Title I public school. She is currently a graduate student at Sam Houston State University, getting her master's degree in Reading/Language Arts with a Reading Specialist certification. She is interested in becoming a reading specialist or an instructional coach.

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