

## Labor

It was almost fifty years ago when Mrs. Dave came out on the enclosed porch attached to our trailer to tell me she needed to go to the hospital to have a baby. The news stunned me. I sat there huddled at the old desk in my plywood framed "study," my feet stuffed into old felt-lined boots, nestled up against an ancient electric space heater stuck in the knee hole. I certainly knew she was going to have a baby, but that was supposed to happen NEXT week, after my semester exams. And when I completed and submitted my term papers. Besides, first-time mothers often delivered late, or so I was told in the New Parents Seminar we attended at the old Memorial Hospital in Syracuse during that summer.

Suddenly feeling the burden of fatherhood for the first time, I reluctantly left off writing my paper on Communications Design and saddled up the old Pontiac for the ride into the city from our lovely home behind the gas station on Fairmont Corners.

My wife appeared nervous, and that rattled me a bit because this girl was not often shaken. I knew, having tried sometimes to get her blood up when I just wanted to start an argument. But now as the caring and concerned father of our child, I tried to live

that role and asked if there was anything I could do to help. She mentioned that if it were possible, she might prefer I undo something. That being impossible, she settled for my stopping to get her a Coke.

"Well," I said, as we continued our journey down West Genesee St., "you look pretty healthy to me. You'll do fine. Don't worry about anything. My mother had three of us and look how she turned out."

That was the last time I heard her laugh for a couple of days. As it turned out, almost forty hours would pass before our son was born. He was as reluctant to enter this vale of tears as today he is reticent to enter into conversation. A quiet and thoughtful man, my son is very much like me, but a lot less likely to think out loud. And he's a better writer.

Syracuse's old Memorial Hospital was a dark and dingy place in 1966, just a few years before it closed. If you were born here in the 1960's, your parents were likely Medicaid recipients, beneficiaries of a newly minted program for the poor or studious or, like me, both. Trying to live on peanuts each week, I certainly appreciated the largess of the state's politicians' use of federal money. Nelson Rockefeller was the governor at the time and I always thought I should have chosen his first or last name as my son's middle name. Before I discovered we were eligible, I lay awake nights trying to figure out where I would find the funds to pay the hospital \$275, the obstetrician \$250, and an extra \$25 for the circumcision if it were a boy. I joked about wanting a girl to save money.

My night job at the Daws Drug store in the mall paid only \$1.25 per hour. I had occasional high paying work from IBM

installing engineering changes on the large mainframe computers around the Syracuse area, but it could only be done in sizable chunks of time during vacations. When Mrs. Dave became pregnant, I considered quitting school, but she made me promise I wouldn't. I settled down to the job of becoming a father-student.

Back to Mrs. Dave, she wasn't having very much fun, either. The dark and dingy halls of the hospital didn't inspire much confidence that she would be properly cared for.

And as it happened, she wasn't. But 36 hours of labor finally produced our first child, a son, on a Tuesday morning in December of 1966.

What do two twenty-one year old kids know about having a baby? Through all of this, I sat two floors below in the father's waiting room. Around me, young fathers came and went from Sunday night to Tuesday morning, receiving news of their child's birth from a telephone over in the corner. From time to time, I'd take my attention away from my books and call upstairs to inquire about "Mrs. Griffin," and each time I used that name I felt like I was asking about my mother.

Finally, the call came downstairs and I bagged my stuff and took the elevator up to see my wife and new son. Mrs. Dave was lightly sleeping when I was shown to her bed. She was so white I wondered if she was dead. When I remarked on my observation to the nurse, as politely as possible given the circumstances, the woman smiled and said having a baby took its toll on a woman. My God, I thought. What had I done to this poor girl?

Life restarted itself, as it usually does, and

we began our life as a family, adding to our number in 1969 with the birth of our daughter. We just jumped into family life as does any young couple with babies. High chair in the kitchen, no smoking in the car, the little spare money we had from time to time now earmarked for some purpose unthought of a year ago.

Family life in America. It didn't last very long. The kids grew up faster than speeding bullets and I grew old even faster. Today they have their own households, and I have grandchildren who come down the Thruway and set up a temporary art studio of crayons and rubber stamps and stickers in my study, this one with central heat and wide windows looking out on a field of grass and trees and no gas station.

Life has been good, and Mrs. Dave's labor was fruitful. The two children she gave me are gifts I couldn't possibly deserve. How do you thank someone for making you a father? I would guess by doing the job as well as you can.

copyright 2010, 2016 David Griffin,

**The Windswept Press**  
Murrells Inlet, South Carolina

[www.windsweptpress.com](http://www.windsweptpress.com)