

The Pulse: Thanks for a mother's love, and choice of neighborhood

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'Mother's Day . . . a time for warm thoughts and fond memories, for expressing the feelings and words that often go unspoken.'" So begins the card manufactured by American Greetings that I mailed to my mother in celebration of today.

The onetime Miss West Hazleton High School married my father when both were living in that Luzerne County coal community. Soon they moved to Lykens, Dauphin County, where my father was hired to teach school, and not long after, my brother was born. I arrived four years later, by which time they'd relocated to Doylestown, Bucks County, which is where my brother and I were raised.

I see and speak to my mother often. Still, it'll be good to be with her this afternoon and chances are we will reminisce about the past. Like the time when Mom drove my brother and me to Little League baseball and decided to step into the batter's box, only to hit one over the left-field fence. Or how, at our urging, the night before a rock festival was staged in our small town, she drove us slowly in our '66 Chevy so we could spy the "hippies" sleeping out in tents. We might laugh about the night she dragged my brother out of a dance after seeing some "hoodlums" smoking outside. While my brother and I most feared my father as a disciplinarian, it was usually Mom who meted out justice, with a yardstick she acquired from Cross Keys Hardware.

When I was in the eighth grade, the state of Pennsylvania raised the credits required to sit for the real estate exam. That change spurred my mother, a high school graduate, to take weekend classes and take the test. My job was to follow her around our house, posing questions from a manual supplied by the Schlicher-Kratz Institute. The day of the test she was so nervous she didn't want to get out of bed. But she did and she passed. It was the start of a spectacular career that continues today.

My mother has twice built thriving residential real estate businesses. Her hard work and success as a Realtor afforded our family a lifestyle (and me an education) we would otherwise not have enjoyed. Today I'll thank her for that, and for guidance, and for unconditional love. But now I'm adding something new to the list. I want to thank her for not only how she raised me, but also where. I always suspected I had an advantage growing up in Doylestown - now there is data to prove it.

New research released last week from Harvard economists Raj Chetty and Nathaniel Hendren underscores the importance of where children are raised on their future well-being. "The earlier a family moved to a good neighborhood, the better the children's long-term outcomes," wrote Justin Wolfers, an economist from the University of Michigan, after analyzing data that looked at over five million children who moved across counties when they were growing up in the 1980s and 1990s.

Bucks County ranks among the most advantageous in the nation for upward mobility among boys raised in low-income families, far surpassing the two communities where my parents first resided. The research found a near causal relation with the number of years a child is raised in a certain county with the child's future average annual income. For example, a boy raised in a low-income family in Bucks County can expect to earn \$4,130 more in annual income compared with his counterparts in the other analyzed counties nationwide! In this category, Bucks also outperforms Philadelphia's other suburban counties.

Luzerne County is at the other extreme. For boys raised in low-income families, Luzerne ranks better than just 12 percent of counties nationwide. Male children raised in low-income families can expect to earn around \$2,000 less in annual income than their counterparts in other counties nationwide. My parents' next homestead, in Dauphin County, doesn't fare much better. Boys from low-income families there could expect a decrease in annual income of \$1,900.

We weren't raised poor. When Dad was a guidance counselor and Mom was a secretary (before selling real estate), we were decidedly middle class. For our income grouping, Bucks County also stands out as a place conducive to upward mobility.

Had we been raised in Luzerne County, Chetty and Hendren predict that we would have seen a \$710 increase in our average incomes (not bad). If raised in Dauphin County, however, which ranks among the worst counties in the United States for upward mobility, the researchers predict a \$1,610 decrease in future annual income. Thankfully we were raised in the county seat of Bucks, where the research shows a \$1,620 increase in average annual income for boys in middle-income families compared with their counterparts nationwide. Bucks County ranks behind only Chester County in the Philadelphia

area for children's future outcomes in average-income families. The combination of good schools with better test scores, intact families, and civic engagement provides a backdrop for climbing the economic ladder.

"Place matters," Wolfers told me. "Neighborhoods have profound effects on kids, and that should be something that policymakers really put their eye on."

My mom, the Realtor, would probably express it differently: Location, location, location.

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