

Of Mighty Mouse and independence

By Brenda Haas

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Flashback to 1987: There were many firsts that summer – my first time living away from home, my first real job, my first date with a cartoon character.

Just a day after graduation, before I'd even had the chance to put away my cap and gown, I received a call from my high school choir teacher.

"Brenda," Miss King said, "this is your chance. They'll pay you. They'll actually pay you to sing and dance!" Miss King's naturally high soprano voice tended to squeak when she got excited. She knew a friend of a friend who needed someone young, reliable and marginally talented to work the summer at an amusement park, called Playworld, in Nashua, New Hampshire. The position was as singer/dancer with a troupe that had lost a member due to illness. They were, at this point, apparently desperate.

I had exactly one day to make a decision.

Within 72-hours, I was sharing an apartment with 3 other women, learning dance routines and music beyond anything I'd ever done in high school, trying to mesh with my male partner who was 10 years older than I, eating an unlimited supply of midway pizza and meeting Mighty Mouse, an amusement park employee, age 17, with dark eyes and a bright smile beneath the papier mache, fur-covered rodent head he sweated in for hours while walking around the amusement park entrancing small children for minimum wage. I was in paradise.

Before my cross-country trip, though, in just about a day and a half, my mom scrambled to prepare me for three months away from home. She bought me new dance shoes, shampoo, and a healthy supply of Kleenex. She made sure I had enough underwear. And Ramen noodles.

Being the person she is, she never expressed concern about the hundreds of miles away I would be from her for the first time in my life. She never showed reluctance in trusting her daughter's wellbeing to a bunch of strangers she'd never met. She never mentioned how it made her feel to help her daughter pack her bags ... for all intents and purposes starting her "adult" life sooner than expected. We had thought that day wouldn't come until I began college in the fall.

My mom may be a bigger person than I. Although, I do suspect she had a major meltdown after leaving me, and my bags, at Playworld that first day.

As my own daughter, Elaine, speeds through her senior year, I find myself bursting into tears at the drop of the proverbial graduation hat.

It can be nothing more than writing the last check for her spring musical activity fee.

It can be noticing her senior picture propped on our piano.

It can be the full laundry basket she must jump over to get to her bed ... every night.

It can be the Snapple peach tea, which only she drinks, peeking out from behind the milk in our refrigerator.

It can be her laughter, a very distinct burst of joyous giggles that is hers and hers alone, tinkling up from the basement when she has a friend over.

It is all of those things that remind me that my daughter ... my very beloved daughter ... will soon leave the nest for the first time.

Elaine is, most likely, headed south to Georgia for college next fall. I will miss her more than she can possibly know. I will miss that laundry basket, the peach tea and the laughter, but I know my girl is ready to spread her wings and be independent. It is her time to find her Playworld.

So, when the cap and gown have been put away in our cedar chest and the graduation parties have come to an end, I will help her pack her bags for the next chapter in her life. I'll make sure she has plenty of shampoo, underwear and Ramen noodles.

But the Kleenex?

The Kleenex stays with me.

Brenda Haas maintains a reading website: www.powerofpages.com.