

# Leaving a Legacy

## Tips for Raising Children to Accomplish Great Things

By Valley Virtue Staff



**W**e recently sat down with Cynthia Merrill; the meeting was enlightening, thought provoking, and full of great advice. After spending several hours with Cynthia, it was clear there were several directions this interview could have gone. This interview could have been about her accomplishments as a dancer, producer, business owner and mentor to children interested in dance. It could have taken the focus toward her nationally-renowned talents teaching etiquette. Instead, the focus of this article is to share the thoughts, ideas and practices Cynthia used with her sons, and how she raised her children to accomplish great things.

Cynthia is originally from Fitchburg, Massachusetts. The City of Fitchburg is a community of about 40,000 people, which even today retains its small town flavor. Fitchburg is noted for its old mills that line the Nashua River, its hilly topography, and regional parks, and its tightly knit neighborhood enclaves that, in many cases, still retain

their ethnic identity. It is the stereotypical New England town those of us to the west would picture. It is a community of hard workers, a community of prideful people, who possess strong beliefs by which they stand firm. These are traits and characteristics evident in Cynthia. These are characteristics that also contribute to her successes and the successes of her sons.

Cynthia moved to Fresno in 1970.

We began the interview by asking Cynthia to talk about people that had influence in her life and asked her to share things with us that she has learned along her journey of accomplishments.

Cynthia began the interview by stating, "My life has been good because I made good choices and have made sacrifices. It wasn't that I didn't face challenges in my life, we can't control what happens in life but we can control how we react to what happens. I came from a family of hard working artists, teachers, and business owners. They were major influences to me.

*We have a tremendous impact on our children and on other children. We teach them through our examples of good work ethic and successes."* We continued to explore her thoughts about raising children and the influences of today.

**V. V. - How did those influences affect you raising your sons?**

*"With my boys it was critically important to establish a good work ethic. Their ability to work, focus, and carry through to the end was crucial. Even at 12 they were expected to learn to work; they worked as referees for soccer games. Nathaniel, who was playing football on Friday nights, was expected to be refereeing on Saturday morning. After one game he had a separated shoulder. He asked me what he should do about refereeing the next day. He called a friend of his to come and take his place. The point was he didn't let anyone down by just not showing or calling in. He found the solution. He saw it through. My sons were independent and took care of things. I made them take the bus or ride bicycles. At age nine we would travel and they read the maps. If we were riding trains, they would figure out the tubes and connections."*

*"At age 14 or 15 I added up all the money I spent on Nathaniel for a year on dress shoes, clothes, movies, lunches at school, ect., divided that by 12, set up a checking account and a credit card and I put 1/12 of the total every month into his checking account. He had to use his credit card for everything and had to pay it off at the end of each month from money in his bank account. I had taken him to a Financial Planner. He learned what he didn't spend he could keep. He went from a child who wanted designer clothes and wanted to do everything, to a young man who would ride with his friends. He spent half the amount of money on clothes, and he changed where he shopped. By age 18 he had excellent credit, could write checks and balance a check book. At age 18 he knew the value of money. One time he received money from his grandmother; he invested all of it. He received a stipend from Stanford; he would live poor and save the stipend."*

*Now he is financially well off because of his hard work and knowledge of money."*

*Secondly, "I think our youth needs to know how to physically work and develop a good work ethic. They have to understand how to earn money. Lastly, is the importance of education and continual learning. My oldest son, who is an excellent teacher, had two homes by 25 years of age."*

Cynthia has two sons, Nathaniel Merrill and Cyrus Merrill. Both sons are college graduates. Nathaniel played football in the NFL after college until an injury shortened his career. He is now seen on television and in real estate publications for successfully flipping houses. Cyrus lives in San Jose, CA, and is a history teacher. He has been a world traveler since the age of 18. *"He went to Timbuktu just to say he had been there but didn't find anything there for tourists. I taught my sons to fly (meaning she taught her sons to explore life)."*

**V. V. - Where did you learn the good work ethic you teach to kids and young adults?**

*"I think it is in part instinctive in me. At age seven I started a club and directed and organized it. At age 12 I formed another club The Lofty Club, that organized fund raisers for Braille watches and also sent kids to camp. We did good things for people in the community. We had structure: we had a poem, a prayer, minutes, attendance sheets. I came from a family that had a very good work ethic. My mother and father worked around the clock. Mother was an English teacher, always grading papers and Dad ran a grocery store and did stuff around the house. I come from a family of 11 dancers, Carolyn Brown, my first cousin, being the most famous. She was an internationally famous dancer who just released a book about her life as a dancer."*

*"I grew up in a New England heritage where you typically save money*

*and you don't flaunt your money. It is considered rude to do so. So, you take a great deal of pride in your home and you don't need to continually buy bigger homes simply because you can and you don't buy flashy cars - you buy solid cars. You educate your kids to the highest degree you can with what you can afford. My children never had things that were EXTRA special things. Even though they had a lovely home to live in and money to have the educational extras that helped them to be cultured, they didn't have the extras that were wasteful or frivolous. Experiences were provided that would benefit them. We got my son a truck but he had to pay half. They went to school without transportation but they knew how to take the bus and be self-supportive. You say to your children that it is not necessary: you don't need to do that or buy that. We do things the way WE do things not because of the way other people do things. You have to educate your children on what is adequate and what is excessive."*

**V. V. - In Fresno and Clovis (as in other cities) there are parents whose attitude focus on material things and financial comparisons with other families. You see at some schools young kids, seven year olds, with \$100 - \$200 purses. I see real mistreatment of young kids by other kids their age based on economic status. How do you teach your students who are lavished with material things to be kind to those who are not?**

*"In my cotillion, (which her sons attended from 5th to 12th grade), I teach young ladies you only need one lovely dress for all three occasions, and I purposely wear one dress over and over, as a role model. If I have one lovely cocktail dress I am not going to go out and buy something extravagant every time. I say to the girls, it is better to have one nice dress that looks really nice on you. Say it is a pretty red dress, and you go to a party or dance and there is a gentleman that found you interesting to talk to and liked dancing with you. At the next party he is going to be looking for the red dress because that is what he remembers you in. When he sees you in that lovely red dress he knows that is the same girl he danced with and there*



is definitely an advantage to that. He has the same suit on; he doesn't have a new suit. He might have a different tie. I teach that so the people who may not have the money for three different dresses won't feel out of place. They can also say that Mrs. Merrill wears the same thing so I can wear the same thing."

"The disadvantage is the children who make decisions based on what other people do or have, tend not to make decisions on their own. We need to teach children to think for themselves, to do what they love to do, and not be influenced by their friends."

"At my cotillion I see children who need guidance, structure, good manners and acceptable behavior. Another one of our activities is practicing how to meet new people. They introduce themselves and welcome others into the group. Good manners is being socially inclusive not exclusive. I realize a lot of my life is about child rearing and helping children and young adults grow."

**V. V. - If you were talking to parents about developing focus for their kids, what do you see that today's parents need to focus on?**

"Kids need the opportunity to be busy and try new things but do not over schedule them. You find the parents that have their child in something different every day of the week - that is over scheduling."

"When they are involved in other activities outside of school it is important WHO is teaching them. You want to find someone who is exceptional at what they do. If you find a tennis teacher that is exceptional, let your child learn from her/him. That is what you want, children learning from exceptional people. Look for the best programs in your community and let your children learn exceptional habits and skills. You don't want your children to learn from programs or people that are negative

or inadequate; it leaves the children with bad experiences. If your child has an interest in dance and you can't find a good program or teacher then have them do something else."

"My theory is by the time your child is 17 years old they should have a teachable skill. Something they are good enough at that they can teach someone else that skill. If it is dance, music, roofing a house, it doesn't matter. They are learning to stick with something long enough to have a teachable skill. You want them to master something. It could be staying in 4-H long enough to teach others about animals. You are teaching them stick-to-itiveness. So they understand you start here and continue with it until you get here. You do this as opposed to parents who put a child in a semester of dance, and then soccer and then cheer and then something else. While you want to explore different things with your child, when you find something they like, stick to it. You need

to help them learn to stick through the hard times. This means when none of their friends are dancing any more and they want to quit, you say No, you have put this many years into it, you love dancing, you are good at it. Just because your friends don't do it means you stop. It is a matter of teaching them to overcome the obstacles. We all do it. We start something and we quit. I like to think that parents are guiding their child to have a teachable skill. This gives them a skill they can use to get a job at 17 years old."

"Secondly it builds confidence and gives the child an identity. By the age of 17 and often younger, it is important that a child has an identity. When the rest of their friends move on to soccer and they stick with dance, they will identify themselves as a dancer. Whether they stick with it until adulthood or not will remain to be seen but at this point in their life, they have an identity. The child doesn't have to seek an identity through their peers."

