Children are precious gifts from God. Those of us who are fortunate enough to be called Mom or Dad relish in those endearing words. Becoming a parent, for me, has been by far the most exciting and fulfilling moment in my life!

Needless to say, from the moment we experience the joy of our child’s birth, we go into what I call ‘protective mode’. Most often we have a number of years before it becomes necessary for us, as parents, to hit the ‘protective mode’ button. However, for me it happened much sooner than I had expected. In 1984 at 8 ½ months old, our baby girl suffered second and third degree burns to 23% of her little body. She spent her first Christmas as a patient in the Pediatric Burn Unit of Children’s Hospital National Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

Although the burn accident was 31 years ago, I still carry with me the memories of the harshness from all of those people who looked at my daughter with stares and distaste – and, oh, the inappropriate questions and comments directed to me about my baby girl. It was never about my feelings but rather about the fact that my daughter was being subjected to stares, questions and down-right rude comments.

Early on I took the stance that I would not let others judge me or treat my daughter any different than other children. It actually took quite a bit of self-control on my part to not react negatively to the ignorance of others. At any rate, I was successful and that success taught my daughter a great lesson. I had set a positive example that she would latch on to and carry with her from childhood to adulthood.

Since we lived in a rural area and there was no such thing as ‘Burn Concern’, I routinely packed up my daughter, and traveled in excess of one hour to Children’s Hospital. I took great pleasure in those visits as they were my only means of support other than from family (who
lived four hours away) and our very close friends. When my daughter was 7 years old, we moved from Maryland, where the accident occurred, to Pennsylvania where I grew up and where we would have unconditional love and family support. We needed a hospital and a physician to follow her and so we chose West Penn Hospital and Dr. Douglas Newton as her physician.

We settled into our home and enrolled our daughter in the parochial school that I had attended as a child. She thrived. When it came time for high school, she chose to attend the local public high school. I was not particularly thrilled with her choice as I knew I would not be able to protect her as I had in the past since the climate in a public school would be so very different. Her four years there turned out to be quite a learning experience for her and our family. Many of the teenagers as well as their parents were very cruel to her but she held her own and continued to become a strong young woman.

After high school graduation, she attended and graduated from Citizens General Hospital School of Nursing. Her passion was to work with burn patients. So shortly after graduation, she landed her first nursing position in the Burn Unit at West Penn Hospital. During her time in the WPH burn unit, she tried to establish a support group for burn survivors. It was a difficult feat for a new young nurse. Much to her avail, she was not successful. During that period, however, she continued her education at Duquesne University and graduated with a Masters in Nursing Education. The lessons she learned while growing up and the practical experience garnered while working in the burn unit reinforced her passion to become an advocate for burn survivors. During these years I continued to be there for her through the good and the not so good times in her life. She left the unit after four years and took several positions as a trauma/critical travel nurse until she took a permanent position as a professor at a university in Fort Myers, Florida. Her passion for educating future nurses continues today and she is now at a university in Towson, Maryland. She presents burn lectures and has written several articles and continues to be a dedicated advocate for burn survivors.

About a year and a half ago, my daughter and I were invited to attend a Burn Concern meeting at West Penn Hospital. We were so excited to know that a support group had been formed. Since that time, both of us have become Phoenix SOAR certified. After 31 years, we have finally found a home and a wonderful family in the Burn Concern support group. I would be remiss if I did not give special thanks to the directors – Beth and Ray Smith, Dennis Gillin, and Vanessa Rossi. All of us from the burn survivor families in this area will forever be indebted to the four of you.

When I started writing this article, I didn’t know which direction it would go. After re-reading my words, I know now that it was my daughter who inspired me and continues to inspire me to be strong. She is my hero and I’m one proud Mama!

Left: Kathleen Ryan and camp volunteer, Denise Sweeney, at the 2015 West Penn Burn Center Summer Camp. Right: Kathleen Ryan and her daughter, Tara Ryan, enjoying a nice day together in Pittsburgh.
What I Celebrate on This Day
By Tara Ryan, Burn Survivor and Phoenix SOAR Peer Supporter

Anniversaries arrive in various forms, offering different meanings and evolve as we allow ourselves to grow. It is on this particular day, many of us feel the power of being alive.

The anniversary of my burns is a day of liberation and empowerment that continues as I walk through life. It is a day of gratitude and a powerful reminder of my second chance. It reminds me that I cannot waste one second of my life. As I become more confident in my own skin the more beautiful my burns feel. I cannot imagine living in any other skin. It is my hope that this confidence is apparent to my patients as I care for them at the bedside and as I stand tall in front of my students. I had not known the weight until I felt the freedom.

When enough time has passed and you have survived that which you never thought possible, there is a particular dignity in that. It is something you can own, something that can never be taken away. A pride in knowing the relentless pain made you stronger. It is this pain that made you fight to succeed for everything you have ever wanted.

As burn survivors we belong to an elite club, each offering a different perspective. These perspectives allow us to grow together as a community helping others. We all possess an intense drive to help others so that they may never feel alone. There is strength in numbers.

When I spoke to my dear friend, Dennis Gillin we discussed the evolution of what this day means to us. Dennis stated “My anniversary means a lot of different things to me and it has changed so much over the years. It used to be just my worst day of the year. Now it’s a day to reflect on my life and remember how to do what needs to be done.”

Another cherished friend and fellow survivor, Francisco Betancourt describes the day as one of remembrance, reflection and appreciation - a day to dwell on my

Tara Ryan, Kathleen Ryan, and Dennis Gillin enjoy watching the magician at the West Penn Burn Center Summer Camp for Burned Children on June 7, 2015. Members of Burn Concern were invited to visit the burn camp to ensure campers knew about our growing support group. Burn Concern hosts monthly meetings every 3rd Saturday and offers peer support through the Phoenix SOAR program. Burn Concern’s motto is:

“No One Can Heal a Burn Survivor Like a Burn Survivor.”
past and hope for the future. I think about the house fire, my brother Alonzo, and myself were trapped in. I think about my mother and how she must have felt the moment she knew she would not be able to go up the stairs which were engulfed in flames. The flames that separated her from her children. I think about the community and the fire department who rescued us, possibly feeling an intense mix of relief and horror when they first saw us as they transported us to the hospital with skin coming off our bodies. I think about the initial grief experienced by my parents when they learned Alonzo did not make it. And then I think about the fact that I did. After arriving at this thought, I spend the rest of the day wondering why. I think about where I am at in my life on that particular day and the direction I want to go in.

Most recently, I was preparing to enter my final semester of graduate school so that one day I can help children and their families who have experienced traumatic life events. Today, I say with great pride, that I now possess a Masters degree in Counseling Psychology. I am one step closer to my goal. Reflection of my achievements makes me proud and spurs a continued fervor to achieve what I feel I am meant to do. I am never more proud on any other day than I am on January 18th. This day serves as a reminder of what I have been through and helps me to appreciate how far I have come. This date is one in which I was reborn. I know with certainty, I would not be the person I am so proud to be today if it were not for that day. While my “burniversary” elicits thoughts of loss and death, it ends in the prospective vision of a fuller life.

Everyone has scars, ours are just more visible. We proudly carry them as our badge of honor for the world to see. It is these scars, these stories that have united us in strength and love. The resilience and power of the human spirit is celebrated on this day.

Francisco Betancourt and Dennis Gillin take a break from dancing during the Gala at the West Penn Burn Center Summer Camp for Burned Children on June 9, 2015. Francisco attended the camp as a child and now is a longtime counselor.

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