

TIME, LOVE AND ATTENTION - THE MOST VALUABLE GIFTS OF ALL

-BY DEBBIE STRAUSS



Now that the holidays are here, and life is like a crazy race to your gift-giving deadline, remember that no matter what gift you give your children, it is your time and attention that really is the gift that keeps on giving.

I want to introduce you to an extraordinary woman who has a special gift of her own. Her name is Charlene Kurland, and she is my mother's best friend. Char and my mom were both

young mothers living in the local Southampton neighborhood of Burgundy Hills back in the 70's. There were lots of times that my sister and I would be at Char's house playing with her two kids, Eric and Elisa, playing anything we could imagine. The Kurland's house was built for fun, and it all began with Char.

As a kid, you knew there was something about her that made you just gravitate towards her. With a big beaming smile, she could instantly relate to us kids by getting down to our level by telling us jokes, doing magic tricks and telling the most incredible stories. She is a natural born entertainer whose desire is to simply entertain children by showering them with the fun and attention they all crave. This desire ultimately lead her into the field of entertainment by creating and becoming Chaku the Clown, one of the most beloved professional children's clowns in the tri-state area for over the past three decades.

But before she created her alter ego, she recalled her earliest of performances took place at the diaper changing table with her son, Eric. "I would go to change Eric's diaper, and I would sing songs... I had signs on the wall that I would read to him, I read poems and he would kick his feet and laugh!" Taking her time to relate and play with him, she conveyed the message to her infant son that his life is fun and happy. "He knew that it just wasn't just about the diaper change."

Once her kids began the birthday party "circuit", Char recalls that children entertainers were few and far between back in the 70's. "There was one clown out of Jersey who was terrible. He was actually a magician who did adult parties. To make extra money on the weekends, he would do kids parties and put a clown suit on. So he would come in and do the same show that he did for adults. He pulled a rabbit out of a hat, made fire in a pan, but it wasn't geared for children." One incident that she vividly recalled with this magician was a trick he would play with a rope and a scissors that wouldn't even cut through paper. "He asked for a volunteer, and my son Eric was called up," asking him to cut the rope, he had

tried and tried, but ultimately he could not do it. The other kids in the audience were laughing, not at the clown, but at the unsuccessful volunteer. "They were laughing at my son's expense."

Well, that was it. Char saw a unique opportunity to fill a void. She combined her love of children, her innate playfulness and self deprecating humor and created Chaku the Children Chuckler. Chaku is a clown who purposely is not really very good at her own game. She often has difficulty pulling off the perfect magic trick, and sometimes makes blatant mistakes. But if her skills are a little off, that's just fine, because the kids in the audience are there to help her out. "I'm the clown. I'm going to make lots of mistakes, and my audience will help me. And in the end, I can do it because they helped me, and I can finally be the clown that I want to be because of them!" She brings out the best in kids, just like she did when I was young. Every child (even the ones that are super shy or afraid of clowns) wants to help her do her tricks. It is her unique way of making her audience feel empowered, smart and not afraid to chime in during her performance. As word spread of her great performances at children's parties, she was voted Philadelphia Magazine's 'Best of Philly' Clown back in 1990. Char's career of 'clowning around' reached heights she would never had considered had it not been for her love for kids, fun and games.

Char's own children have grown up in a most positive light. Eric is married and works as a successful 3-Dimensional film producer in Los Angeles. And Elisa, who works as the Director of Career Services at Philadelphia's University of the Arts, is also married and lives in Wyndmoor with a daughter of her own named Jemmi. "We have a great relationship. My kids can talk to me about anything at all."

After so many years as a mother and professional clown her advice to moms and dads is simple. "Time goes by so quickly. Whatever problems are going on, when my kids talk to me I stop. If there's laundry that needs to be folded, or dishes have to be cleaned, or dinner has to be made, the dishes don't know the difference, but my children do. They know whether I took the time and allowed them to feel important enough that what they had to say mattered."

To this day, Chaku the clown still entertains droves of children. Char and my mother are still great friends, and our families will always have a special bond between us. I have always treasured my relationship with Char and her family that started so long ago when I was just a baby. That was the gift she gave me, and it is just as valuable to me now as it was way back then.

For more information on Char and CHAKU the Children Chuckler, visit her website at www.Chaku.com

