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REVIEW

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New Energy For Alaska

'Who's Your Daddy?' Great question! I see that I got a "thumbs down" on the Anchorage Daily News Sunday scoreboard with an accompanying insinuation that I may not have the appropriate dad to allow me a particular public service role. Maybe the ADN should interview us wanna be's (or has-beens!) and find out who are our daddies? Binkley's, Hood's and Palin's. It may shed light on how we've come to do what we do.

I've always said my parents are much too smart and way too nice to be in politics. My dad is not rich or famous or powerful. He's more than that. My dad is Mr. Heath . . . schoolteacher extraordinaire. He came north in '64 to teach in Skagway. Forty years later he still subs in our district because his gift is connecting with Alaska's young people.

More often than not when people out here in the real world run into me they don't say, "Oh, so you're Alaska's Oil and Gas Commissioner? Or, "Oh yeah, you were that mayor." Nope. They say, "So you're Mr. Heath's daughter? Cool! He's my favorite teacher of all time!" I wouldn't wish it any other way.

My dad is in Zimbabwe today. He and mom are celebrating their 42nd anniversary trekking through some African jungle. They regularly do things like that. They recently returned from their umpteenth season working on an Aleutian island where they "shoo away" birds from an airstrip so villagers' airplanes can land safely. Before that they spent their second season on Palm, volunteering for The Nature Conservancy "shoeing away" giant rats that have inhabited TNC's remote, tropical island. In between gigs they worked clean up at the site of the World Trade Center rubble.

Their travels and adventures, always together, never end. But they always make it back by fall so they won't miss the start up of the school year, ready and raring to go with new found excitement and perspective that they've gained from some recent exploration. They are anxious to teach about the wonders of nature, especially the nature here in our Great Land.

Sometimes I haven't a clue, coming from non-political Chuck Heath, why I remain passionate about wanting to change the world through Alaskan politics. But I know without a doubt that my dad's love for this state, his independence, his strong work ethic and right priorities are my foundation and influence for every decision I make. He's my most loyal supporter. Me, the media-stamped 'hard core conservative Republican"! He's also the number one fan of one of his best buddies and hunting partners, Dr. Curt Menard, the well known democrat. He's much too smart and way too nice to base relationships on politics.

My dad is a Boston marathoner, Chilkoot Trail hiker, cross-country skier, snowmachine traveler and obsessed angler. A lucky escapee of avalanche and bear scares and close calls in duct taped-together airplanes. He's done it all and he keeps going back for more.

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I'm thankful for all my dad taught me and allowed me to do. I'm glad he dragged my butt out of bed early autumn mornings to hunt ducks with him before cross-country running practice. He taught me to bag a caribou, fillet a fish, dig buckets of clams, and find the plumpest blueberries. He wouldn't put up with my wimpy reasons why I couldn't thaw frozen fish egg bait in my mouth, like he does, when ice fishing. But he did understand when I looked up at him quizzically once upon his request to "please hold those" while he searched for something to put our freshly butchered moose's eyeballs in so his students could observe them later that day. He graciously understood, and I didn't have to hold those ungulate's warm parts that morning in the alders.

My dad gave me two of the greatest gifts in my life: an upbringing in Alaska and an appreciation for all one can gain from athletics. He was Wasilla High School's track, cross-country and freshman basketball coach. He never let me quit, no matter how badly it hurt or how the odds were stacked against his athletes. He taught "no pain, no gain . . . and, you reap what you sow . . . and, there ain't no such thing as a free lunch . . . and, dig deep, push hard and fully rely on your ROCK!"

(In our case, that ROCK would be God.) These are lessons I draw on everyday.

In terms of support for all our activities and ambitions, gender was never an issue in our home and I hope I am perpetuating that mindset with my own daughters. I want it to be a foreign thought that they can't do something based on gender.

Dad raised four healthy, happy kids who are now, with our spouses, all happily doing our thing serving Alaskans as: School teacher, state trooper, nurse, dental hygienist, commercial fisherman, oil production operator, community volunteer and coach. And one unlikely (or has been!) politician. Aging athletes all, I might add.

Mr. Heath is grandpa to 12 fortunate young Alaskans, having an especially unique bond with his autistic eight-year-old grandson. From the first born, Track, on down, to Bristol, Willow, Piper Indi, McKinely, Happy, Karcher, Lauden, Payton, Keir, Heath (just 12 days old!) and Tico (who will enter this world and meet his Grandpa in September), our kids will grow up having the privilege of being positively influenced daily by their very own resident school teacher. (Starting kindergarten I remember feeling sorry for classmates who weren't Teachers' Kids. TK's had a jump on other students, I felt, who may not have been taught via casual dinner table conversation the difference between a crocodile and an alligator, or a grizzly and a brown bear, or told clever acronyms for remembering planet alignments and chemical compounds... and all that other good stuff that elementary school science teachers just know we need to know.)

No doubt dad will give these grandkids all the sage advice he gave me: Money isn't everything. In fact it's nothing in terms of happiness; but remember you can fall in love with someone rich as easily as with someone poor." And his not-so-subtle advice to "Turn off the TV! Read! Get outdoors!" And my favorite, "Life's too short to be stuck in a rut so do what you enjoy doing." Recalling that particular bit of advice today has me contemplating what it is I'm doing now. My dad believes in paying your dues as you progress because nothing comes free, but you'd better be challenged and happy and energized in what you are doing or it's just not worth it. It's good contemplation material.

So seeing the "thumbs down" on the newspaper editorial scoreboard with the suggestion that my dad may not be the right dad to allow me to progress towards some political position that may not be in the cards for me right now anyway . . . gave me the opportunity to think about just who my dad is today. I thank the ADN for that.

"Who's Your Daddy?" My dad is Mr. Heath and he's a teacher. In my book he is rich because he continues to share the wealth. I'm proud of him and thankful for his humility, adventuresome spirit, energy and compassion. I am especially thankful for his love for Alaska and for teaching others about this Great Land. In fact, the next time my name is in that newspaper, they should go ahead and use my full name: Sarah Heath Palin.