

CHAT ROOM



Kathie O'Donohue

Nature/nurture debate rages in one local home

In a college psychology class, I was initially introduced to the "nature vs. nurture" debate, wherein proponents for each side state their case. Those who espouse the nature theory believe we are born with innate personality and sex differences, and that how we are brought up has much less impact on an individual's development. On the contrary, the nurture group believes it is how we are nurtured as infants and children that more significantly impacts us.

I belonged to the nurture group, ignorantly believing that a child is most impacted by his or her nurturing and that nature has much less to do with it. Until I became a mother, I was happy in my ignorance. But my children have taught me volumes. They have successfully and thoroughly confused me regarding all those idealistic and intellectualized hypotheses I ventured in college. What I have learned in the old nurture vs. nature debate includes the following:

Genetic programming

At my house, boys seem genetically programmed to not flush the toilet. Towels are filthy the minute they're used, and "clean hands" we are they have dutifully surrendered their paws under the running water for all of three seconds. Never mind the fact that there's more dirt than skin visi-

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At Adat Shalom

TV's Suzanne Somers tells gritty tale of early life

Nearly 1,000 women packed a Farmington Hills synagogue to hear actress Suzanne Somers recently.

By MARY RODRIGUE
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Playing against the dumb blond TV stereotype of such roles as Chrissie in "Three's Company," the real Suzanne Somers proved to be a thoughtful, perceptive speaker last Wednesday in an address to nearly 1,000 women at Adat Shalom synagogue in Farmington Hills.



Somers, 62, was the guest speaker for the Choices event of the Women's Allied Jewish Campaign, which funds 200,000 social service programs worldwide. Guests paid a minimum \$150 contribution to attend.

Best known for her TV roles in "Three's Company," "Step By Step," and "The New Candid Camera," Somers is also the author of six books and a frequent entertainer in Las Vegas. But her talk Wednesday focused on the obstacles she overcame as the daughter of an abusive alcoholic father in a family which chose to cover up the rampant dysfunction which continued for years. Somers chronicled the tale in her autobiography, "Keeping Secrets."

"The only courageous thing I've done in my life is make the choice to change my life," she said. "Where I've been no longer drives my life today. Keep what is good. Change what is not."

Somers has been happily married 31 years to former TV game show host Alan Hamel.

"I have a wonderful husband and a beautiful relationship with my children, stepchildren and grandchildren," she said.

A rough beginning

Her early years, however, were the stuff of soap operas.



Step by step: Suzanne Somers talked about her transformation from victim in an abusive family to successful performer.

Raised in the San Francisco area in an Irish Catholic family, she recalled how her father would drink every night and then beat her mother, Somers, or one of her siblings.

"Booze was the focus of every occa-

sion," she said. "We had a special closet in our house with a lock on the inside. We slept more nights in that closet than in our beds."

In her remarks on the eve of Barbara Walters' interview with Monica Lewinsky on ABC's "20/20," Somers reminded the audience to have compassion for the president. Not to excuse his behavior but to keep in mind he is the child of an alcoholic father. We never fill that empty hole inside.

She explained that as a child she was always told by her father that "I was a big fat zero who would never amount to anything. When you hear that enough, you believe you're not worthy when something good happens. I'd wreck every good thing in my life. We do things to sabotage ourselves. We thrive on crisis."

Although she never drank, Somers says it took her years to realize alcoholism shaped her life.

"You're powerless growing up in an abusive home - watching mom get beat up by dad. All through my childhood, I hid in a closet from my father."

"It wasn't until I met my husband that hugging and kissing became a normal thing. With my family, there was never any softness. The day I was born, my father got drunk. That's always how he was until 10 years before he died."

Living with an alcoholic made her a perpetual liar, she said.

"I'd lie about why I didn't have my homework done. My lies got me into so much trouble. The disease of not drinking had me around the neck."

Coming to a head

The crisis that began to turn things around for her began her junior year in high school.

"Mom took me to San Francisco to choose material for my first prom dress. I chose a pink sequined/peach chiffon skirt combination. She was going to make the dress for me."

The night before the prom, mother and daughter sat giddily in Somers'

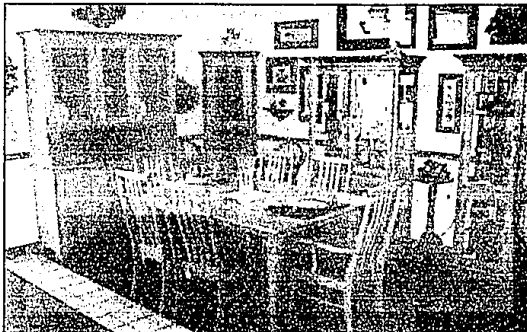
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