

According to Middle-Aged Mike

Written by Mike Johnson

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For a few years in the late 1990s, I had a column in this publication called "According to Mike." Considering I could babble about whatever topic came to mind and Margaret was a fair and charitable editor, it was a sweet deal. What was the column about?

Everything and nothing, like most columns. I can't say what it was like to read it but, looking back, I can tell you how it felt to write it. It was the journalistic equivalent of being in a rodeo and riding an enraged bull while typing with one hand and swinging the other arm wildly to keep balance. Though it seemed normal at the time, my personal life and busy partying schedule kept things bucking – an eventual and complete retreat became necessary.

I left Lady's Island and parted ways with Lowcountry Weekly; some years later, I finally grew up.

While time can aid the maturation process, I think having a family is the real agent of positive personal growth. It took having a wife and kids to shift the mechanics of the cosmos enough to let me realize that I am not the center of the universe and there is much more in play besides my immediate needs and worries.

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Recently, my 4-year old son, Foster, reminded me of this revelation. The two of us took a boys' vacation to Hilton Head while my wife and baby daughter stayed behind in Wilmington, NC. My parents live on the island, and considering I had just been laid off from my job, I had no real conflicts on my schedule and knew my mom craved hard-to-get quality time with her grandson.

Of course, I wanted to bring him to Beaufort and it was hard to pass all of those I-95 exits without turning. We could've walked along the waterfront park, through the Old Point neighborhood, browsed the inns where I once worked, maybe dined at Applebee's to see if Thad and the gang retired my apron after my last shift. But as much as I wanted to see these settings from my past, I couldn't bear to bring my young son on a nostalgia trip, strapping him in for a ride down my memory lane. Why force my memories onto him? He's a kid; it's up to me to lay out a banquet of possibilities and let him make his own memories.

As it turns out, all a little kid wants to do is swim in a pool. We could've stayed in the pool at the condo for the entirety of our trip and Foster would've gladly skipped the beach and meals and sleep. He paddled around the pool for hours, his brown arms puffed with water wings, until he was shriveled and shivering.

We did manage to dry him off and offer a few alternatives to the swimming pool. The Newhall Audubon Nature Preserve provided a serene pocket of nature in the middle of Hilton Head's traffic and summer bustle. We explored a network of bike paths and watched the hunting egrets, herons and anhingas, taking turns with the new binoculars I'd scored for Father's Day.

A highlight for all of us was fishing and crabbing off the dock at Shelter Cove. Despite not catching any crabs – Foster pulled up the trap every minute, ignoring our logic that it had to be underwater to catch crabs – we did land a few fish, including a spot, croaker and few small sharks that seized his fascination so fully you could almost hear the memory embedding into his hippocampus.

As it turns out, we all collected memories. My parents got to fish with their grandson and hear all of the interesting things that can come out of a little boy's mouth. Foster got to swim, laze and absorb the easygoing spirit of the Lowcountry. I got to take a road trip with my son and ponder the various speeds and phases of human growth. And, just like clockwork, this little chunk of SC coastline delivered what we all needed at just the right time.