

Prom Night, Revisited

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor



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It's prom night at Beaufort High, and I'm down in Waterfront Park at the Great Parental Prom Pic Preening. Okay, I just made up that name, but the annual gathering is very real, and it's something to behold – hundreds of teenagers swanning around the seawall in dazzling finery as their parents snap away and the early evening sun spits fire off the river.

It seems we were just here yesterday, for my daughter's junior prom, and I'm wondering how we could possibly be back already. I spot Amelia through the crowd of fresh young faces and my heart stops. Last year's pink princess dress has given way to a sleek black number that makes her look about 25 and impossibly sophisticated. She has no idea how beautiful she is.

My little girl.

As if this moment were some kind of death, I see our life together pass before my eyes. Amelia on the merry-go-round at Pigeon Point Park... In the red Radio Flyer, sitting on a stack of Lowcountry Weeklies I'm delivering... Amelia on the back of my bike, riding to the boat landing... Beside me on the dock, watching dolphins... I see her in the 4th grade play as Jiminy Cricket . . . Leaping across the stage in her middle school dance recital... Picking out Christmas trees and pumpkins and last year's pink princess prom dress...

Fighting back tears, I snap out of it and snap some pictures.

Five years ago, I wrote a column called "Raining on Prom Night," decrying the long-standing Beaufort tradition of parents renting houses on Fripp Island during prom week so their kids can party "safely." Well, guess where my kid has been since Wednesday? You got it. Fripp Island.

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Even five years ago, I wasn't really criticizing those prom parents so much as commiserating with them. Even then, I knew my time was coming, and that I would cave. I just didn't realize how soon it would happen.

In slightly over a month, my only child will graduate from high school, then in August, she's off to study abroad through the Rotary Youth Exchange. *For a year.* (She won't even be home for Christmas.) After that, it's college, then who knows what . . .

But for now, it's prom night. And she's with her friends. They're good kids. They've all been to "Prom Promise" at school. They know the danger of drinking and driving – probably more so than I did at their age. It's been drilled into them over and over and over again. I pray they've taken those lessons to heart.

Five years ago I mused on those lessons in my column, and on the great lengths to which our area high schools go to educate our kids about alcohol. I wrote, "At Hilton Head High, all students going to prom had to attend a lecture by Dr. Nessa Miller, Savannah Memorial University Medical Center's chief trauma resident. Dr. Miller spoke to the students about what she sees in the trauma unit, showing them shocking photos of people who'd ended up there. She described what it's like to be drug tested in the trauma unit, the loss of dignity when you're stripped naked for all to see. She also discussed the dangers of drinking too much, even when you're not driving, telling the story of a patient whose esophagus was ripped away from her stomach from vomiting so much. Students at Whale Branch, Battery Creek, Beaufort and Bluffton High Schools all had to attend similar presentations in order to get their prom tickets. Many had to sign pledges not to drink and drive."

At the time, I wondered how effective these scare tactics were, and also about the wisdom of renting the houses on Fripp. I wondered if there might not be a better solution. A third way. Looking back at that column now, I still think I might have been onto something. Maybe it bears repeating:

If you put me in front of a bunch of teenagers today, I would certainly warn them against destroying their futures. But I would also warn them against missing out on the present . . . failing to revel in it, to recognize the immense wonder of it. Do you have any idea how lucky you are?
I would ask them. How amazing

it is to be 18 years old?

You are so young. So full of possibility. Look at your beautiful, strong bodies. See how they

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carry you through the world with such ease! What, they're not perfect? So what!? They're perfectly marvelous! (Trust me, you'll know this one day.) Stand tall in them and delight in every move they make. And your minds! Your minds are agile and ready, like coiled springs. They're sponges just waiting to soak up the world. That date you asked to prom? Isn't she gorgeous in that dress?! Look how it picks up the gold flecks in her eyes. (Tell her!) The music you listen to? You will never forget it. One day, when you're much, much older – maybe you're driving home from work, feeling beat down – that song you love will come on the radio (on some "classics" station) and you will be instantly 18 again, feeling everything you're feeling now – the joy and angst and frustration and anticipation – and you will know then what you don't

know now . . . that 18 is magical, and it never comes again. Eighteen is warm sun on your shoulders and wind in your hair; it's sand beneath your feet and slow dances, handholding and kissing and talking all night long. Eighteen is the whole world before you, luminous with promise. It's a natural high. And It Never. Comes. Again.

Be there. Be right there. Notice everything. Feel everything. Delight in everything. This is no time to be out of it, no time to be "comfortably numb." This is the time to be deeply, madly, intensely awake! You need to feel all of it. Even the pain. And you need to remember it. Because 18 never comes again.

I know. I was there. And I'm so glad I didn't miss it.