

Smile On

I thought taking care of my mom meant putting my dreams on hold

BY CHRISTOPHER JAMES BOHINSKI, Wilkes-Barre Township, Pennsylvania

MOM HOOKED HER ARM THROUGH mine. We walked slowly across the back porch, or at least as fast as Mom could go, taking in the autumnal colors. “What’s bothering you?” she asked, squeezing my arm. She knew something was wrong. She always knew.

“I guess I feel a bit...lost,” I said.

The pine trees and butterfly bushes were beautiful. Yet they reminded me that just months earlier I’d been living in a cramped apartment in Harlem, chasing a dream that now seemed further away than ever.

I love to perform and have always wanted to live in New York City. I had studied chemistry and musical theater at Wheeling Jesuit University. Months before I graduated, my father passed

away after a courageous battle with brain cancer.

Shortly after I graduated, my mother fell ill from septic shock. I decided to put my plans to move to NYC on hold to help care for her. That caregiving lasted 10 months until she recovered. Finally I was able to move to that apartment in Harlem.

I went to auditions and worked catering gigs to pay the rent. I met a lot of talented people. But I recognized a common thread in those I met: negativity. What I’d been through with Mom and Dad made me want to make my mark in a positive way. But how?

I created a blog called *NYC Smile*

JOY FOR LIFE Chris and mom Barbara know that a positive attitude makes all the difference.

JIM GRAHAM



4 Me, which focused on the question “What makes you smile?” I’d record people’s answers and post them online. Just that question alone made people smile—and God smiled on my efforts.

Soon I started receiving press passes for red carpet events. I interviewed stars like Jonah Hill, Helen Mirren and Bette Midler. Everyone had a different #SmileStory. “Getting asked that question makes me smile,” Chita Rivera said. “Children!” Steve Martin said. “My dog, Thunder Pup,” Kristin Chenoweth said. “A garden full of ivy and knots,” Molly Ringwald said. I was dubbed Boh the Smile Guy. People loved the videos I put up on my YouTube channel. I was making people smile!

I was working at the U.S. Open when my sister, Chesla, called. “They found something on Mom’s lung,” she said. I went home immediately, praying all the way.

For the next eight months, I split my time between New York and Wilkes-Barre Township. Ten days working—glamorous parties and celebrity interviews. Ten days sitting with Mom while she received chemotherapy.

All those three-hour car rides gave me plenty of time to think. *What do I really want to do?* Make people smile, of course. But it was too hard when I was worried about Mom.

“Mom, I need to move home full time,” I told her.

I waited for her to list all of the reasons I shouldn’t move back. Mom had always been my biggest supporter. She knew exactly how much I would be giv-

ing up, just when things were coming together.

“If that’s what you think you need to do,” she said, “then okay.”

I uploaded a video to my YouTube channel explaining why I was moving. “You’re making a terrible mistake,” one of my friends said. “Don’t throw everything away.”

Yes, but Mom was Mom. She came first, no matter what the sacrifice. On the eve of my three-year anniversary of living in New York City, I packed up my Harlem apartment.

I immediately threw myself into my caregiving responsibilities. Doctor’s appointments. Laundry. Serving meals. Playing shut-the-box. Putting together puzzles. Dispensing medications.

WITH EACH PASSING DAY, MY caregiving duties made my dreams seem more and more delayed. What did I have to show for myself now? I remembered when the *Today* show’s Natalie Morales interviewed me and said, “I appreciate you. There needs to be more people like you. I believe in you.” I didn’t regret being with Mom—not for a moment—but there was so much I wasn’t doing.

That day on the back porch, walking slowly with Mom—the only exercise she was up for—it took me a while before I could really answer her. What was wrong? “If I’m going to be here, my smile mission is going to be here too,” I said finally.

“People need smiles everywhere,” Mom said. “There’s a lot you can do for



COURTESY CHRIS BOHINSKI

THE SMILE GUY Chris with his mom and Kristin Chenoweth

others right here. Go and see what resources the mayor’s office has for you.”

NYC *Smile 4 Me* in Wilkes-Barre Township? Mom was right. People everywhere need smiles. I checked to see when the next town council meeting would be. Mom and I kept talking and hatched an idea.

A week later, I entered the town hall, an imposing brick building. The council and mayor sat around a large round table. They spent an hour discussing town business, and then the mayor asked if there were any new agenda items. I stood up, took a deep breath, smiled and began to speak.

“I have a proposal,” I said. “Some of you know the work I do with my smile mission. And since moving back to care for my mom, I haven’t been able to find a way to bring it to my hometown. Well, I would like to put on an event here for our town—a Smile Festival.” I outlined what it might be like, a sort of fall festival, with free activities for everybody,

and lots of food. Food definitely made folks smile.

The council took it under advisement. The next day the mayor called to ask me to meet with him in his office.

“Chris,” he said, “October 21 is officially Smile Day! You’re in charge.”

I hurried home to tell Mom the exciting news.

“Mom, guess what?” I said when I burst through the door. “We’re in charge of a community-wide fall festival on October 21!”

“October 21?” Mom glanced at the calendar. “Honey, that’s only four weeks away.”

Four weeks. How on earth were we going to pull this off? It wasn’t like going to some Manhattan opening where I just stood on the red carpet with my microphone. I had to make this red carpet out of whole cloth.

“Where do we start?”

“Let’s get to work. We’re going to have to be creative,” Mom said.

We cleared off the kitchen table. Mom took out a pad of paper and began making lists. Places to call: the fire department, the police department, the print shop. I put out a call on Facebook. “Smile Day is happening. My mom and I need your help. Send people and ideas our way, and we’ll do the rest!”

The responses poured in. A friend

helped set up interviews with local radio shows to get the word out. A dentist donated prizes. A college fraternity offered to oversee the ring toss. A Girl Scout troop volunteered to run a face-painting booth. The police department offered a meet and greet with its K-9 unit. The fire department said they'd cook the pizza and hot dogs. The yogurt shop volunteered its penguin mascot for pictures.

I worried that all this planning was too tiring for Mom, but she waved off my concerns. "All of this excitement is a nice diversion from my numb hands," she said. They were a side effect from her chemotherapy.

The morning of the festival was sunny and crisp. Mom and I arrived early to oversee a balloon delivery. Everybody had a million questions: *Chris, when should we put out the cupcakes?* *Chris, when will we present the Dr. Stanley T. Bohinski Smile Day award?* *Chris, where should people park their cars?* *Chris, when do we give out the raffle prizes?*

My big question to myself: *What if nobody shows up?*

AT 10 A.M., THE DOORS OPENED. By 10:15, the fire hall was packed. The mayor pulled me aside. "Boh, this is the most attended town event in recent history!" I looked around the room. Senior citizens playing Bingo. An Elvis impersonator rockin' and rollin'. Families dancing. Parents smiling. Kids winning prizes.

In that moment, I realized the power



SOUL SUPPORT Chris and his mom are caregivers for each other.

of a smile. And I knew I was exactly where I was supposed to be. My own dreams weren't delayed; they were just coming true in a different way than I had ever envisioned.

I've been living at home for over a year now, and currently Mom's health is on the upswing. I'm still a caregiver, making pancakes for Mom at 3 A.M., when her medication keeps her awake, celebrating milestones like the day she was able to drive again. But she also acts as *my* caregiver, slipping confetti-stuffed cards into my bag when I make the occasional foray into New York for some event, always welcoming me home as I pull into the driveway. I pray that her health continues to improve.

In the meantime, I make each moment count. With a smile. **G**

For more on this story, see **FAMILY ROOM**

JIM GRAHAM



FAMILY ROOM

MEET THE PEOPLE IN OUR PAGES

In just two and a half years, **Chris Bohinski** (*Smile On*, page 54) has asked his signature question, "What makes you smile?" to 500 people for his website **nycsmile4me.com**. He hit the milestone with Tony Award winner Lea Salonga while covering the 2018 Drama League Awards. Regular travel from Pennsylvania to New York—sometimes accompanied by his mom, Barbara—gives Chris time to work on a new hobby of his: knitting. Shortly before moving back home to take care of his mom, he stopped in a yarn store and got a free lesson. "I was approached by a man who thought I was there for 'gentlemen's night,'" Chris says. "Over the next two hours, he taught me how to knit." Chris's specialty? Hats. He made them for his mom when she lost



BOHINSKI Chris and his mom team up to make people smile.

her hair during cancer treatment. Now that she's in remission, he gives them out to other cancer patients. Next up? The second Smile Day in Wilkes-Barre Township this fall. Chris hopes to bring together his New York and hometown friends this year. "I have about a dozen city friends who are ready to make the drive to Pennsylvania," he says.

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What makes you smile?

By CHRISTOPHER JAMES BOHINSKI

WILKES-BARRE TOWNSHIP, PENNSYLVANIA

