

My Hometown

By Tara Spinelli for Jersey Moms Blog

When I skipped in my denim overalls with the safety-pinned strap from my small, somewhat diverse private school to my new town's public junior high, the transition wasn't pretty. On the first day, the biggest obstacles weren't social or academic but mechanical: cracking the code of my locker combination and covering books with advanced origami folding techniques before the dawn of the book sock.

Within a few weeks, I would think of the locker and book-cover challenges with nostalgia—however much they had made me sweat—as a group of 8th grade girls surrounded me to ask why I had called their friend a “f*#%ing whore.” I had no idea who these girls were or exactly what the phrase meant, but the fact that I wasn't in my version of Kansas anymore was painfully clear. Like the book sock, anti-bullying legislation or even awareness didn't exist, so as far as I knew, this was my problem to solve.

I became less naïve about the ways of middle school as the months passed, but this didn't help me much in 8th grade when a case of mistaken identity put me in the crosshairs of the girl who sat directly in front of me in homeroom. It wasn't me but a friend of mine who had denied her a piece of gum back in 7th grade, and now she wanted blood instead of Bazooka. She'd regularly turn around to say in a menacing whisper how she was going to beat me up after school. She never did, but the surges of fear still packed a punch.

Early in high school, I was a little distracted trying to look more cool and less like a mark (I retired the overalls). It wasn't until Drama Club junior year that I realized it was a lot more satisfying to apply myself to something creative and collaborative than smoke cigarettes and drink Tab at the pizza place (among other recreational activities).

I also realized that if I studied harder, I could get out of town and maybe still go to a good college if I was lucky. I didn't know how to reconcile my new plan with some of my old friends, which meant I didn't handle the shift in a way that makes me feel proud, but live, learn, and take responsibility. As an adult, I know all of the pieces don't have to fit together seamlessly, but as a teenager, I didn't know how to accept and even embrace the aspects of my life that didn't square.

Fast-forward more than a dozen years to when my husband and I decided to buy a house in my old hometown. Returning here, especially from the hip, progressive place where we were living at the time, wasn't really on my list. We didn't have kids and maybe never would, so I tried not to think too much about what it would mean for my imaginary offspring to have some of my own less positive experiences if they went to school here.

Intellectually, I knew it wasn't inevitable—they would be their own people, not new versions of me—but my feelings were still mixed. Ultimately, the draw of the kind of house we could get for our money trumped the fate of imaginary kids. I figured if we ever had kids, we could always move.

Let me back up and say a few words about the kind of town this is: family-oriented, hard-working, moderate, multi-generational, homogenous. My Jewish grandparents had moved here from Newark, NJ in the 50s, and my mother grew up here from age 10 through high school.

When I was a small child, I would go to temple with my grandparents and hang out at my grandmother's Mahjong games with ladies named Gertrude and Ruth. I always thought the town was a Jewish town, whatever that meant. In reality, Jews and other minorities were a tiny fraction of the residents.

While the composition and core values of the town haven't changed a ton over the years, I think we're a little more diverse and open to new ideas/ways of doing things than maybe we used to be.

My children are doing well in this school system, and my daughter who is now in 7th grade has enjoyed the expanded responsibilities and freedoms of middle school. Now that middle school has checked out, I can look ahead to high school without dread, expecting that my children will continue to learn and thrive and not count the days to "freedom" (at least no more than the average high school student). I want them to live in the present, not with disregard for the future, but in recognition that today matters just as much.

I've thought many times about moving somewhere else, giving my kids completely different perspectives and experiences than I had growing up, and living where my concerns about things like climate change, industrial food production, and other injustices are the norm. There are many amazing places in the world to live. But even if all of the pieces don't fit together seamlessly, we've chosen this one, and I don't mind saying, it's my hometown.