



What

Mom

Taught

Me

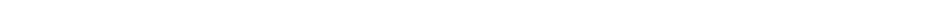
Health wisdom is often passed down through the generations. Writer **Valerie Berenyi** looks at how it travelled between five mothers and five daughters

Along with her first breath and first steps, a daughter most often takes her earliest health lessons from her mother: what to eat, when to sleep, how to react to the world.

Like eye colour or a genetic predisposition to breast cancer, some of a woman's health inheritance is hard-wired. But much of what any child learns about being healthy is taught, either with explicit directions ("Brush your teeth after every meal") or by example ("Mom

always did her morning stretches"). Experience plays a big role, too ("We grew up vegetarian so I don't eat meat").

Of course, "health" means many things. We asked five women from around the province to tell us about the health wisdom they gleaned from their mothers or grandmothers. They shared some vital lessons: eat healthy food, be active, get an education, cultivate a positive outlook and never give up.



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-Sara Renner

Grow a garden; preserve the bounty

Those interested in how to raise an Olympian may want to follow Barb Renner's lead. She brought up her daughter at a remote backcountry lodge perched high in the Canadian Rocky Mountains, put her on cross-country skis as soon as she started walking and fed her oodles of healthy, home-grown food.

"My mother instilled in me the importance of eating good food and of growing a garden," says Sara Renner, who won a silver medal in cross-country skiing with Beckie Scott at the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin.

Renner's parents, Barb and Sepp, ran legendary Mount Assiniboine Lodge, located southwest of Banff, for about 30 years.

"When my mom came out [from the lodge] on her time off, she was constantly squirrelling away food," says Renner, explaining that the family also had a house in Invermere, B.C., where her mother still tends a huge garden with fruit trees. "When I was a kid, about seven, I remember my mom canning and preserving all the fruits and vegetables she grew or bought. I do that now."

Thirty-eight-year-old Renner lives in Canmore where she is co-owner of Paintbox Lodge with her husband, retired World Cup champion alpine ski racer Thomas Grandi. Like her

mom, Renner grows a garden—potatoes, carrots, peas, rhubarb—and has a root cellar that she stocks with her home-canned tomatoes and "huge bulk orders of things like oats from Alberta organic farmers. I put a lot of effort into sourcing our food."

And, just like her mom, Renner, the mother of three children ages one, three and seven, places top priority on healthy meals and eating together as a family. "It's important to involve the kids in the preparation of our meals," she says, "and it's important to say that we're thankful before we eat."



Photo: Sarah Vaughn



Cultivate a positive outlook

The daughter of a psychologist who counselled families and children, Maya Ichikawa says she feels almost guilty about her childhood in Lethbridge.

“Everything was so accepted. It was smooth sailing, even in my teens. I felt no desire to rebel against anything. It was part of [my mother’s] training, I think,” Ichikawa says.

“Mom was very open to conversation and very positive. She really encouraged me to take different perspectives and to take care of myself. She was my major confidante,” says Ichikawa, adding that her teenaged pals also loved to talk with her mom. “Our house was a central meeting place. My friends felt comfortable and safe.”

Always encouraged to express

herself, Ichikawa, 41, first did a degree in fine art, majoring in illustration. Recently, she followed in her mother’s footsteps and completed a master’s of education in counselling psychology and now works with the Lethbridge School District supporting marginalized families through a program called Making Connections. She’s also studying art therapy online, and hopes to work in that field.

Ichikawa’s mother continues to be her guiding light. The 74-year-old survived breast cancer nine years ago and now does aquafit every day. “She’s very inspirational to me because she’s healthier than me now,” says Ichikawa, the busy mom of three kids ages five, eight and 11. “I don’t have time to exercise.”

She also admires her mother’s community-mindedness. Thirty years ago her parents hosted families who were part of a wave of Vietnamese immigrants to Canada. Today they “give back” through the Buddhist Temple of Southern Alberta, where her mom teaches mindfulness and journaling classes. “And now that I’ve had kids, I’ve gone back to the temple,” says Ichikawa, who leads art groups there.

Of her mom, she says: “She’s found her space in her older years. It’s really inspiring as I discover how I want to develop and approach life: wisely, mindfully, aging gracefully and actively.”

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-Maya Ichikawa

Get an education

Evelyn Ellerman, associate professor of communication studies at Athabasca University, holds a bachelor of arts degree in linguistics and French literature, and a master's and doctorate in comparative literature.

Ellerman credits her mother for instilling in her the importance of getting an education, although she wishes her mother—a stern, repressed woman born in 1916 to Victorian-era parents—had also taught her more about reproductive and emotional health, and passed down some domestic skills.

"I learned very early not to talk to her about emotions or anything to do with the body," says Ellerman, 65. The Edmontonian explains that, when she began to menstruate, she thought she had a stomachache and bled all over her bed.

"My mother was furious that I had stained the mattress. She had no words to talk about the body," Ellerman recalls. Her mother cleaned things up, handed over some sanitary napkins and told her daughter: "Don't ever do that again."

Ellerman says her mother was a whiz in the kitchen, and proficient at gardening, preserving food, knitting and crocheting. "What I know about the womanly arts, I got from watching her, but I got no instruction from her. She wanted me to go to school, get an education and not do these 'women things.' She thought that I could hire a cook or a gardener.

"Later in life I asked her to show me how to bake bread. She did so grudgingly but didn't think it was very modern of me."

In raising her sons, Ellerman made sure they had lots of information, cuddles, affection and hands-on instruction. "You correct what your parents did to you. . . . Both my boys are excellent cooks who know how to sew on buttons."

*Both my boys are excellent cooks
who know how to sew on buttons
-Evelyn Ellerman*





Photo: Moonlit Photography

Never give up

Tricia Janvier figures her parents gave her a loving and perfectly balanced upbringing.

Her father, pioneering artist Alex Janvier, gave her a fun-loving, positive outlook on life. “He’s my biggest cheerleader,” says Janvier, education director for Cold Lake First Nations and a member of the board of governors for Blue Quills First Nations College.

But it’s her mom, “the rule-maker” and a kindergarten teacher who worked full-time while raising six children, who taught her her most valuable lesson.

Janvier grew up on the Cold Lake First Nations reserve and was an outgoing kid who joined “everything that was available”: figure skating, badminton, volleyball, basketball, students’ union, yearbook and more.

She enrolled in Girl Guides, didn’t much like it and decided to quit.

She understood that we need to rise above the discrimination
—Tricia Janvier

Her mother refused to let her drop out of the group. “I was so mad at her because I thought that was my right!” recalls Janvier. “My mom, who is non-native, told me, ‘You’re going to go through life and people will expect you to quit because you’re native.’”

“She understood that we need to rise above the discrimination, that we are so much more than what people expect from us.”

As a young girl, Janvier wasn’t quite able to grasp this, “but as I grew older I began to see the importance

of that teaching. It carried over with me into my teen years, as an adult and in raising four kids of my own.”

Janvier, 43, went on to earn two degrees—a bachelor of arts and a bachelor of education at the University of Lethbridge—and become a teacher herself. In 2001 she moved back home to teach in her community where, as a single mom, she’s raising her children, ages 11, 13, 15 and 17, to be independent and to never give up. “I don’t let them quit things,” she says.

Seize life (and get lots of sleep)

Carole Anne Devaney comes from a line of fit, feisty French-Canadian women who might be compared to the Energizer Bunny. They'll go and go until their batteries need recharging.

"[We] need a lot of sleep, eight or nine hours," says Devaney, co-anchor of the primetime news show on Global TV Edmonton. "I remember my mom and grandma going for naps if we had a late night playing cards. My mom can fall asleep anywhere for a five-minute nap and wake up feeling completely refreshed."

Devaney, 32, grew up francophone in Ottawa and spent every summer with her grandmother at the family cottage 40 minutes away in Quebec. Grand-maman's lifestyle was and is a big influence on the transplanted Edmontonian.

"My grandma was very active, planting flowers, cutting the lawn, cutting tree branches at the cottage. Recently, she re-grouted the tile in her bathroom," says Devaney.

She adds with a laugh that her grandmother, 90, who skied until 10 years ago, is a voracious reader and a card shark who relishes a game of bridge along with a bottle of Labatt Bleue.

Devaney's 58-year-old mom, "a tiny little thing," according to her daughter, has a similar zest for life. Depending on the season, she

bicycles 50 or 60 kilometres a week and "skis like crazy."

"The thing I remembered the most about growing up is that my mom always read all these . . . magazines, like *Alive*," says Devaney. "She made her own yogurt and created shakes with flaxseed oil and avocados. At the

time I thought she was so annoying. Now I'm just like her."

A hearty eater, she starts every morning with steel-cut oats, yogurt, berries, almonds and maple syrup or honey. It's a healthy tradition that she might pass on to her own daughter, expected in November. ■

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Photo: Katch Studios

