

COLUMN

Promising to fight for freedoms in a world in which key decisions are made for women

VIRGINIA BEACH

Two of my grandchildren visited recently – both girls, one four and one two.

Within minutes of their arrival, the youngest stood on a chair and began singing a song, each line accompanied by carefully choreographed dance movements.



Karen Beardslee Kwasny

Given her age, it wasn't always clear what she was saying, but that only made her performance more endearing.

My husband, Tom, and I stood

by, ensuring she didn't fall and trying to contain our laughter. Finally, she stuck one leg out behind her and the opposite arm in the air, ending the entertainment. I was spellbound. Her infectious grace, carefree confidence and lack of inhibition filled me with joy.

Most young children exhibit my granddaughter's oblivious self-assurance. Yet girls, specifically, lose it quickly and terribly as they begin to grow and more frequently encounter the world around them.

I wondered what I could do to help my granddaughters maintain their chutzpah throughout their lives, especially when so many of our leaders seem convinced that girls and women need help navigating life and making simple decisions for them-

selves.

When our boys were young, Tom and I worked hard to model equality for them in all we did. Neither of us was "in charge" of the household, and we were bothered by the notion that one of us should be. We made all decisions together. We involved the boys in those decisions whenever possible and appropriate. We did not divide our work according to traditional gender roles. Instead, we shared the load according to who did what best and when things needed doing.

We also paid attention to and corrected the boys when they brought home ideas about girls we found dismissive, offensive or oppressive. They weren't allowed to use words like "sissie" to demean others or phrases like "boys don't cry," "stop acting like a princess" and "you throw like a girl" as boy performance and behavior put-downs. And they were taught to open doors for everyone, reflecting our belief that courteousness shouldn't be reserved for women only.

Still, it surprised us how many negative "girl" ideas we had to counter, misogynist phrases we had to banish from their lexicon and times their egalitarian chivalry was challenged.

We were also baffled by the behavior of some of the grown men around us, who used those phrases in teaching their boys about sports and general behavior, did so right in front of their young daughters, and then bragged about their plans to lock their girls away one day with a shotgun at the ready. It all felt a bit medieval. But it got me thinking about how a girl's sense of self is

developed and destroyed.

Flash forward to today, and I'm still wondering the same thing. Each night I turn on the news, and there's another story about another lawmaker taking aim at women's abilities to make significant and often personal life decisions. Lately, the "abortion debate" has been upstaged by the contraception debate, which is very cleverly couched in the language of that daddy at the window.

After all, many have proclaimed that banning contraceptive drugs or limiting contraception methods is about caring for women and protecting them from making bad decisions about their futures – that is, taking a pill to ward off the boogeyman of unwanted pregnancy.

How can we encourage our girls to be confident in their abilities, follow their dreams and chart their own lives when we support leaders and lawmakers who don't trust them to make decisions for themselves and treat them like children who need help with directions and protection from themselves?

Talking to my granddaughters about their "sky's the limit" choices in life makes me feel disingenuous and downright criminal. I can't promise my girls the moon regarding careers and life goals (as many parents and grandparents do today) while those in charge strip them of controlling their futures.

In 2009, Pulitzer Prize winners Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn published *Half the Sky*, a critically acclaimed book that argues female oppression as a human rights issue. It supports empowering girls and women through initiatives that, at least in part, focus on changing mores and laws that subjugate females globally, including customs and decrees that prohibit family planning methods.

It's infuriatingly incomprehensible that our lawmakers are on the verge of doing that to my carefree and confident granddaughters here in the U.S.

All weekend, my granddaughters danced around the house, laughed while their grandfather soaked the air and floor with blue and yellow bubbles, and sank into bed on the last night, whispering of being astronauts and fairies.

When the last light went out, I made a star-wish that their futures would be full of all the freedoms they deserve.

And I vowed to keep fighting for their right to have just that.

The author is a former Virginia Beach Planning Commissioner and college professor. Reach her at leejogger@gmail.com.

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COLUMN

A rural ride reminds us what Virginia Beach needs to save

VIRGINIA BEACH

My grandfather loved leisurely Sunday drives in the country. Years ago, whole families would hop in the car, a relatively new invention, and take to the road to explore the countryside.



Karen Beardslee Kwasny

I recall doing this with my grandparents when I was young. But I hadn't thought about the value of those rides until I realized how important such excursions are to our souls and this area's future.

My husband and I decided

to downsize when our youngest left for college last year. This meant selling our beloved family home. A Saturday open house kicked things off, and my husband and I had to find something to do. At first, we thought we might find an event in the area, but I suggested an old-fashioned Sunday drive.

"Let's just go where the wind takes us," I said, and so we did.

We headed down Princess Anne Road to the rural area, where two-lane roads lead to working farm fields, sometimes confused with open space. As we passed Pungo village, we considered stopping for coffee at one of the local establishments, but we had just started, and so we kept moving.

It was a lovely day, and I rolled my window down to breathe the fresh air and let it blow through the car as we drove. I could feel the stress of the previous weeks leave my shoulders as I settled back for the ride. My husband turned off the radio and let outside sounds waft in while we drove. It was a strange and wonderful sensation, the way the sweeping views uncluttered our minds. I could feel the two of us loosening.

The lush rural area fields suggested a cornucopia of fresh produce, and we weren't surprised to pass many a farm market busy with visitors. I reminded my husband of all the times we headed out that way to pick strawberries, blueberries or pumpkins when in season. I wondered how much time had passed since the last time we did that. We both felt nostalgic being out there after all the trips we took down that road when we were looking for a home so many years ago.

We stopped for lunch at a small local hotspot off the beaten path. We sat at the

window and watched horseback riders come and go, children play in the neighboring yard and farmers chat on the porch outside the door. Time slowed, which can drive a person batty if they're watching the clock, but we weren't for the first time in months. We enjoyed the sensation of not having to be anywhere or do anything.

It was brand new and fine by us. Like so many others, our lives move at breakneck speed most days. But that day, we had nowhere to go and no time to be there, and we had found the perfect way to do just that.

When we got back on the road, we let ourselves meander from back road to back road, frequently noting how wet the area was from the last weeks of rain. Seeing that some of the streets had been closed to travelers due to so much water was heartbreaking. It reminded us of how fragile this area is and how worthy of protection.

Along the way, our youngest texted us about stopping at the Blackwater Trading Post, and so, with the happy thought of nowhere else to go, we did. We then spent over an hour sitting on the porch rocking chairs, greeting fellow customers, and watching the day go by. Our agent called to tell us it was safe to come home. We thanked her. Then we kept on rocking.

I often took my youngest for rides to the rural area because it reminded me of my favorite childhood places. We visited farm markets, stables, the library and stores. It has always been the place I like best in Virginia Beach.

While serving on the Transition Area Committee and then on the Planning Commission, I frequently found myself in the rural area meeting with residents or simply driving around to understand better the area and the residents' environmental and development concerns. Always, my time out there reaffirmed my conviction that the area must be preserved for future generations.

Since that "Sunday" drive together, my husband and I have often commented on what a great day that was, despite the reason for our ride or the stress before we got on the road. We know we're lucky to live where it's possible to recapture the peace we found that day in the country.

All we have to do is let the rural area roads take us there – and safeguard the area so our grandkids can do the same.

The author is a former Virginia Beach Planning Commissioner and college professor. Reach her at leejogger@gmail.com.



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COLUMN

Times may change, but the need for young people to get outside on their own remains a constant

VIRGINIA BEACH

When I was growing up, the neighborhood parents pushed us kids outside on summer afternoons and told us not to come back until dinner. Mom rang a cowbell to herd us home when the sky darkened. Stars lit the night as we headed back. If lucky, we could return outside after dinner and play flashlight tag a half mile away in someone's backyard.



Karen Beardslee Kwasny

We roamed all over town. We went ice skating in the woods by ourselves. We took our shoes off to hike up the creek. We bought candy and sodas at the corner store and walked the streets in deep conversation about important things. If we were beyond cowbell earshot or our mother's second sight, another parent would be on the lookout.

Did we get into mischief? Sometimes. Were we ever in stranger danger? I doubt it. Our freedom was essential and not unique to our small rural community.

My family has lived in Ashville Park for 12 years. It is a sprawling subdivision still under development. Our first years here were a time of transition for the development's owners, and many of the few existing houses around us stood empty. There was nothing behind us, in front of us, and only one vacant house beside us.

Our youngest was seven and the only child still at home. My husband and I spent many weekends exploring the area with him, behaving like children, getting muddy and wet as we tromped through the wooded paths and around the lakes at the back of the development.

Slowly, the neighborhood filled out enough that our son found playmates nearby. Some of the other parents shared our willingness to let the kids ride off on their bikes and be gone for hours. Our son didn't have a phone until he was 14, so he and his crew used a set of long-range walkie-talkies to stay in touch with us. They filled their backpacks with goodies and other necessary supplies needed by great explorers and disappeared – sometimes from lunch until sunset.

We put limits on how far they could go into the surrounding woods or the unde-

veloped sections of the subdivision. They knew they had to answer that walkie-talkie whenever one of us buzzed in for a check-up. My husband and I rarely had to jump in the truck to scout them out because the walkie-talkie stayed silent after check-in.

They'd return home hungry and exhausted with grand tales of their escapades. Dropping their bikes at the edge of the driveway, they'd rush into the house, out of breath and always dirty, that outdoor smell trailing after them from the garage to the bathroom to the kitchen. We'd listen wide-eyed, oohing and ahing at the appropriate story points and laughing at their antics.

As the development grew, more kids could be seen riding their bikes on summer evenings or setting off with their sleds if winter brought snow. I love the nostalgic feeling I get when I watch a set of kids travel down the street. Their voices echo as they move past, sparking a melody of memories of my childhood adventures.

There was silence on the streets of my neighborhood during the pandemic. But the sound of kids out and about has returned. In my view, there's nothing quite like it to remind us of how essential it is for kids to have that time outside on their own.

I watched a group of them sail past my porch the other evening, their faces to the wind, their phones nowhere in sight. I was reminded of the secret things they have to discuss that just can't be done in the house – like whether those are muskrats, otters or nutrias in the nearest lake or if the fishing is better at the lakehouse pond or one further from home.

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