

MASK's Minute with Mom: Debbie Gaby

Written by Editorial

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Eighteen years ago, my husband and I went into the mattress business. But before we opened our first Sleep America store, I had already started a mattress recycling program with St. Vincent de Paul to keep mattresses out of landfills. Giving back and positively impacting the community has always been important to me, especially considering the experiences I had growing up.

I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth. Growing up in Texas, we had to work hard for what we wanted. My parents owned an antique store that, sadly, burned to the ground. They had no insurance and we lost everything.

At the age of 13, I left home, went to school and became a nanny. I had no choice but to work. But by having to provide for myself, something was instilled in me to work harder so I wouldn't be in that position again.

When I was 18, I had a daughter. Times got tough again. I was single and divorced, with a baby and no child support. But I didn't let it get me down. I just kept going, fueled by the knowledge that hard work and dedication will always get you somewhere in life.

Looking back, I know those challenges life gave me prepared me for my life's work. As much as I am an entrepreneur, I'm also someone who understands the power of paying it forward.

It's very gratifying to me to help someone get back on their feet. Whether it's a new mattress for a child to rest their head, or a heart-to-heart talk with a young girl whose life has taken a wrong turn, I believe those small gestures make a big impact.

As important as giving back has been to me, I also wanted it to be important to my children. From an early age, I instilled the spirit of giving in my children, who have worked side by side with me on various fundraising projects. In fact, my son was so inspired that he started a shoe drive when he was in the seventh grade. He was on the basketball team and had too many pairs of shoes, so he started a campaign to give them—and other shoes he collected—to kids in need.

Even though they grew up not having to want for much, my children learned the value of hard work. When they were young, my son and daughter were expected to do chores, which they got paid for. I believe this instilled good traits and taught them to respect their things and the people around them.

As parents, we need to instill in our children that giving back is a necessity. It's not a question of if you will, it's a question of when you will.

Open and honest communication is another important value. There are so many things pulling our kids away from us. The strongest tool we have to stay connected with our kids is communication. We need to stop and listen when they share what's going on in their lives.

I believe helping people is my true passion because I was given so much help when I needed it the most. I believe in the law of reciprocity—when you do something for someone, you ask them to pay it forward. I've seen this many times throughout my philanthropic career and what really shines through is the gratification in their hearts.