

One Day at a Time

Life like a sitcom: How channeling my favorite characters helped me build my own.

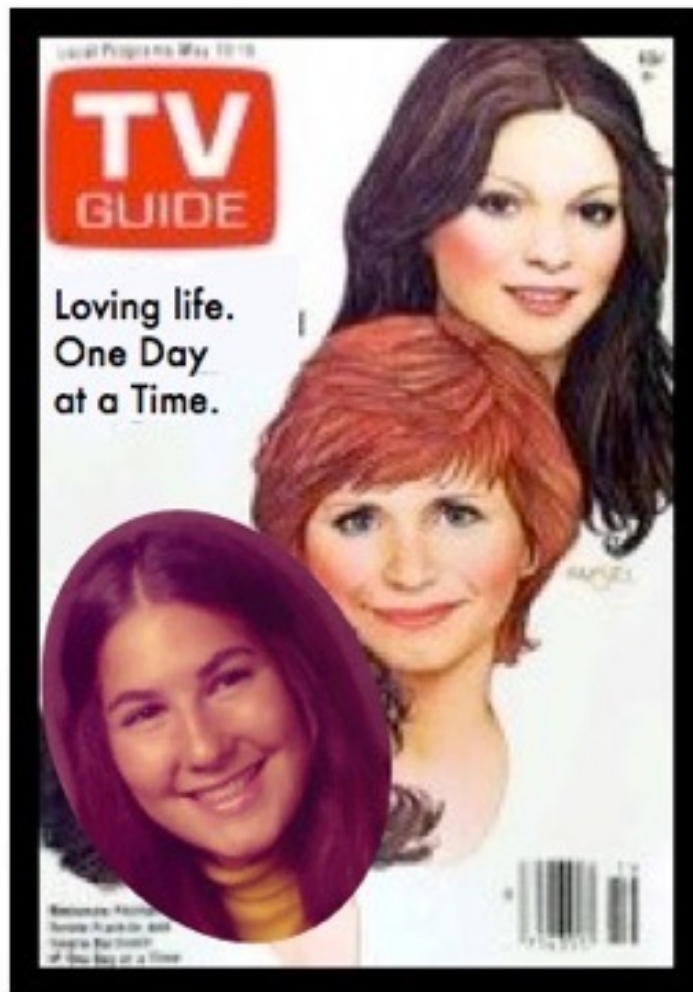
By DONNA LYNN RHODES (Open Post)

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From Hazel to Homeland I have always loved television. It's a part of my life and I realized last week with the news of Bonnie Franklin's passing, just how much TV sitcoms have actually shaped my life.

Really. Hawkeye Pierce, Rob Petrie, Julie McCoy, Rhoda Morgenstern and Bonnie Franklin's Ann Romano, helped make me who I am today. Yes, my life plays like a sitcom — starting from Father Knows Best and The Wonder Years and ending up somewhere between Seinfeld and The Flintstones.

In the 1950s, and 1960s most sitcom families didn't look like or act like my own. My mom didn't wear pearls to dinner and my parents never slept in separate beds. We didn't have a banister, a station wagon or live in a high-rise with an English butler. And heck, we weren't even allowed to say heck.

By the time the late 1960's and 1970's came along, I could see that television was going to play a starring role in what I wanted to be when I grew up. To this day, when I sit down to write a story, I think of The Dick Van Dyke Show's Rob Petrie tapping away on his typewriter. I was bewitched watching Dick York's Darrin Stephens write advertising slogans and campaigns and suddenly smitten when Susan worked for a San Francisco magazine. It wasn't the college course book that helped me pick a major, it was CBS. By the same token, it only took two seasons of Welcome Back Kotter to convince me that I never wanted to be a teacher. And I have Ralph Kramden, Dobie Gillis and Sam Malone to thank for not wanting to be a bus driver, a grocery clerk or a bartender. And Rhoda made me see how no matter what else I do in life, I can always be someone's best friend.

Speaking of Bosom Buddies, my college roommate Vicki and I were lovingly referred to as Lucy and Ethel, Lavern and Shirley or Oscar and Felix on more than one occasion. By the 1980's I was obsessed with M*A*S*H — and I'm quite certain it was the camaraderie of the 4077 that made me want to go live on Kibbutz. And who among us wasn't Mad About You, Lost in Space or or trying to learn The Facts of Life?

Television taught us a lot about social status too. Hazel was the first time I understood that there were the haves and have-nots. Mind you, I wasn't jealous of the Baxter residence but I was of other TV families — especially Eight is Enough and Little House on the Prairie — oh how I longed to be a Bradford or an Ingalls.

I never understood why Gloria and Meathead didn't have a place of their own, or why I couldn't take the train to Petticoat Junction. I once asked my brother why Wilbur Post never told anyone that Mr. Ed could talk. And perhaps the biggest conundrum was why being Jewish precluded me from being a flying nun. It was all a sham. And no matter how hard I wiggled my nose, I didn't get Suzanne Pleshette's voice, I Dream of Jeannie's body or Thurston Howell's money.

But all these years later, I still have my Friends — Ross, Rachel, Phoebe, Monica, Chandler and Joey — and still hang out with them at least twice a week.

Thank you Bonnie Franklin for giving us One Day at a Time and reminding us that life isn't always what we scripted, but like your theme song starts, this is it.