The Year Compassion Made Room

When I was four to five years old, I lived with a man once listed as the most-wanted criminal in Contra Costa County, California. Surprisingly, he was also my first choice to play hide and seek with.

My dad was a pastor and my mom was his most trusted advisor. Being a pastor's kid meant my family was always looking for ways to help our community. Whether it was organizing a toiletries drive for the homeless or finding someone a safe place to live, my parents were always a prime example of unwavering compassion.

John first started coming to our church while I was in kindergarten. He was an intimidating man standing at 6' 6" and almost 300 pounds. He was covered in tattoos, including one of a lewd image of a woman—something my 4-year-old eyes had never seen before. He had just gotten out of a 13-year sentence in San Quentin maximum-security prison for drug trafficking, carjacking, and manslaughter. Yet, he had the kindest smile and a calm presence. He came to church eager to learn and ready to put his life back together. He had children with 3 different women, and he wasn't present in any of his children's lives. My dad began mentoring him, and over the course of six months John built his faith, and rebuilt his life.

At the time, John had been living on the floor of a stranger's apartment, when my dad heard a voice—God's voice, he believes—urging him to ask John to live with our family. Initially, he dismissed it, believing it was his own thought. Then his phone rang; it was John. The lady John had been staying with had gotten evicted and John couldn't afford to live anywhere else. My dad took it as a sign to ask John to move in. He talked to my mom expecting her to say no, but she was immediately on board. John was coming to live with us.

John moved into my room, and I bunked with my brother. Even though he was intimidating at first glance, he quickly became one of my closest companions. After school, my brother and I would play hide and seek with John, it was especially fun because he was so large he had to get creative to effectively hide. My brother and I would always win. On weekdays, John and my family would eat dinner together, and on weekends, John's son, who was also 5 years old, would come for play dates. John was a gentle giant; he made everyone around him feel safe and loved. The year he lived with us was one of the most memorable years of my life.

While John was living with us, my dad taught him how to roast coffee beans (my dad's latest obsession) and John discovered his passion for coffee roasting. Passion became purpose, and John started his own business, Big House Beans, where his motto was "second chances." He began employing ex-convicts and homeless people to give those facing discrimination a chance to make a living. By the time his business was up and running, John had moved out, and there

was an emptiness in our home—and in our hearts—but we were so proud. His business took off, and it now has 3 different locations. He also regained custody of his children, and married a woman from my dad's church. They have three beautiful daughters together.

My parents' compassion completely changed John's life, and that compassion allowed John to make a difference in the lives of ex-convicts and homeless people. Among the lives he changed was mine. Living with John shaped me into the person I am today, the person who strives to love others well, help those in need, and tries her best not to judge a book by its cover. Without my parents' compassionate decision to ask John to live with us, neither John nor I would be the people we are today.

John and my parents have shown me that one decision, rooted in love and courage, can ripple outward to affect countless lives. Their example has inspired me to serve my community for the rest of my life, whether it's volunteering in a soup kitchen or shelter, advocating for sustainability, or using my future career as a biotechnologist to make advances in medicine. That year taught me that compassion isn't just kindness, it's the power to make a true difference.