

Essay #2

Prof. Lee - Leadership Framework for Life

Grace Santoro

Thank you, Mom

When I received the prompt to write about a leader that inspires, historical figures such as MLK, Nelson Mandela, or Greta Thunberg initially came to mind. I am inspired by those individuals in more ways than one and would have difficulty wrapping up those reasons in under five pages. However, the more I thought about a leader who has directly impacted me, knowing *who they are* and *how they act* when nobody's looking... the clear choice was my mom, and I would pick her time and time again. At times, it's hard to put into words how much someone like a parent has impacted you because that holds true for everyone with parents around the world to some degree. Yet when I was thinking about the learning that we have done in this course over the past few weeks to grow into leaders, I quickly realized the traits that I was already proud of are a direct result of my mom's influence on my personal growth. My mom is my best friend, but that close personal relationship isn't why she inspires me as a leader. The easiest way I know how to get that point across is through sharing stories of times that I have observed my mom embody the values of resilience, empathy, discipline, reliability/commitment, and loyalty that I respect and look up to most. But first, I will give a very brief background about my mom's life.

My mom's name is Kate Santoro. She was born and raised in a small town called Scituate, on the south shore of Massachusetts. She is the third born of six children and was fortunate to grow up with two loving parents who are still happy and healthy. Kate went to Salve Regina University and majored in English. After graduating, she lived in Boulder, CO, for one year, where she met the love of her life, my dad, Paul Santoro. The two moved back to Boston

together, and Kate worked at Boston Consulting Group while getting her master's at Northeastern University for Human Resource Counseling. When she was 26, Kate married Paul and worked as a Kindergarten teacher until her first child was born. Since then, Kate has worked as a sales representative for Juice Plus and has spoken at national conferences across the country. In the last 23 years, Kate has had five children and is still a full-time mom to my three younger siblings (ages 17, 12, and 12).

The first value that my mom lives each day with is resilience. Resilience is the ability to recover from hardships with grace, determination, and strength. When my mom was thirty-nine, she lost her twin boys at birth; Sam and Miles. At the time, my oldest brother was ten years old, I was eight, and my younger brother was four. My mom endured a complicated pregnancy until the twins were born and nearly died herself toward the end of her pregnancy when a dangerous infection took over her body. My parents experienced an incomprehensible tragedy, and it took them both time to grieve and process the loss of their baby boys. Although I was only eight years old, I have these flashbacks from the hospital, hearing the news, and the funeral services. However, I do not remember seeing my mom visibly grieve because she always showed up. My mom still walked me to school every day, she still went to my youth soccer games, and she continued to make us busy so we wouldn't notice the unfathomable loss that she and my dad were experiencing. Behind closed doors, my mom was so consumed in grief that my dad sat her down and said, "I need you."

My mom explains that conversation as the pivotal turning point in her journey, and from that day forward, she healed with purpose and the intent to grow stronger. This loss was the most significant hardship that my mom has experienced in her lifetime, but by the time her heart healed, she was more resilient to the continuous battles she was yet to face. My mom found great

comfort in her faith at the time and truly believed that the only path forward was straight through. This resilience became paired with deep empathy for others. My mom's ability to connect to her family, friends, and just about every stranger she crosses paths with is unbelievable. I believe that my mom grew into the person she was meant to be from this loss. The emotional and spiritual awareness that she worked so hard for attracted her to so many individuals struggling in various facets of their lives. The universe has a way of rewarding inspiring people like my mom. Just a year after Sam and Miles's passing, my mom naturally became pregnant with healthy twin girls, a miracle rooted in her deep devotion to faith and the betterment of humanity.

My mom took up running in her mid/late twenties as a hobby. Since then, she has finished 22 marathons and joined the Boston Athletic Association Women's Masters team, helping the team place at the top of marathon competitions. She broke her personal record at the age of 39, with a time of three hours and ten minutes. My mom just keeps getting faster. Although her track record speaks for itself, nobody truly understands the discipline, perseverance, drive, and dedication that goes into competitive long-distance running. To this day, my mom stays quiet about her goals and rarely speaks about her accomplishments unless it is to offer a helping hand. My mom's innate motivation and humility emanate to those around her. In my journey as a leader and captain on my high school cross country team, I strived to inspire others as my mom has inspired me: with humility, grit, and passion.

As a human being, my mom shows up for everyone around her. If it were anybody else, I would wonder how they have any more to give, but not Kate Santoro. Her ability to juggle the schedule of her five kids while never missing any remotely important event throughout our lives is a testament to her reliability and commitment. She is committed to her faith and never skips

out on church or volunteering to help the church in any way possible. Anyone who knows my mom knows that she will be there through the hardships, but will also be right next to you celebrating the accomplishments. As a mother, she's not used to consistently getting recognized and thanked for this. My siblings and I got so used to my mom being present for us that it was strange when she wasn't. My mom always made it a priority to let the people around her know how much she cared, and because of that, her friends and family admire her and would do anything for her in return. In my growth, I've realized that making it known that you care about someone is one of the greatest gifts you can give, which is why I strive to make known my commitment to others through the act of being present and reliable.

My mom grew up as the third of six children. She had a fairly modest life and did not ask her parents for a dime, ever. My mom always made sure to have a job or two at a time and gained learning experience and independence from her self-sufficiency. However, my mom's family wasn't perfect. Alcoholism nearly killed her older brother, and my grandmother also struggled with this disease to a certain extent. The life that my mom and dad created for themselves as adults is impressive considering their humble backgrounds, but jealousy sprung from the success of my mom and her other siblings. Two of her sisters began to compare themselves to other siblings in the family and blamed their parents (my grandparents) for the unhappiness within their own life. Long story short, my mom's oldest sister and her younger sister completely cut themselves out of the family. I haven't seen some of my aunts, uncles, and cousins in over ten years. My mom, grandparents, and a few aunts and uncles haven't seen their sisters and daughters in over ten years. My mom would be the first to admit that her home life wasn't perfect growing up, but that is true for most families experiencing the financial stress of raising a big family. Since the day my aunts walked out, my mom has never missed the chance to

remind her parents of her unconditional love, loyalty, and dedication to their family. My grandparents are old now and have a hard time taking care of themselves, yet my mom sees them about 3-4 times a week on top of hosting every holiday. I can see how hard and stressful it is sometimes, and I ask her *why* in those moments. Time and time again, my mom responds: "because we are family, and you don't walk out on family. You pay the life you've been raised with forward, and you care for, love, and cherish your parents." In this case, loyalty doesn't just present itself as taking sides. It presents itself every day in the endless ways my mom has cared for and appreciated her parents and siblings despite the imperfections and complexities. Watching this commitment to loyalty every day has substantially influenced my perception of being a true friend, daughter, sister, and teammate; what you *say* doesn't always matter; it is what you *do* that proves it.

These are just a few of the many ways that my mom has lived out the values of resilience, empathy, discipline, reliability, and loyalty. She personifies so many more qualities as a mom, wife, daughter, sister, and friend, inspiring me to become a better version of myself. My mom has the ability to bring out the best in others; she has this extraordinary love and sense of adventure for life that is contagious, she is adaptable to life's many curveballs, she never takes herself too seriously, she fights for what she wants and gets it 9 times out of 10, and she is the epitome of a team player. Kate Santoro is an inspiring woman driven by the desire to lift up those around her, live each day with purpose, and constantly evolve into the best human being that can be. My mom is a leader by example who often thinks that *we* aren't noticing the endless ways she has touched the lives of others. So mom, if you are reading this: I may not tell you every day, but you inspire me to grow into a fearless leader that makes just a fraction of the impact that you've had on the world around you. I love you.