

June 15, 2015

Edition: U.S. ▼

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Girls, Shoot for the Stars But....



Penny Phillips Become a fan Businesswoman, New Yorker, Unofficial ambassador for young women striving to create their own identities



Posted: 06/12/2015 5:35 pm EDT Updated: 1 hour ago

As a young woman living in New York City in the 21st century, you were probably told by your parents and family to "shoot for the stars, follow your dreams, and be whatever you want to be." As a young first-generation Greek-American woman, you were likely told all of those things with a few caveats:

Shoot for the stars, but...

- 1. Make sure you get married by 24 so your grandparents can attend your wedding.
2. Have children immediately.
3. Live at home until you get married.
4. Don't move more than 10 miles away from anyone in your immediate family after you do get married.

I am exaggerating, of course. Well... not by much.

When I was 19, I was accepted into the London School of Economics for a study abroad program. Reading the acceptance letter, I felt like Andy at the end of The Shawshank Redemption. I would get to live on my own. I'd get my first taste of the business world. I'd do something no one in my family or group of friends had done.

When it hit me that I'd actually have to tell my parents that I was leaving to go live in London for several months, panic set in. As expected, there were tears. How will we tell your grandparents? How will you survive? Will a nice Greek boy ever date you after knowing you left your parents' home to gallivant in Europe? There were also calls to realtors in London for temporary housing... so that my father, or any of my male cousins, could chaperone me for the duration of my stay.

When I started my first job in investment sales in Manhattan, the reaction was not as dramatic, but I knew what they were thinking: Will you work with only men? Will you ever meet someone who is not intimidated by your job? Are you moving out?

To be fair, my parents and grandparents are incredible people. My mother was born

Epiros; my grandfather owned a diner in the meatpacking district and worked from 2 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day for 30 years. I wish everyone could spend even 10 minutes with my grandparents. They are the living, breathing epitome of the American Dream. They ooze perseverance and resilience; they are the definition of overcoming hardships, putting family first, and not compromising integrity for success.

My mother married my father at 22. My parents are fascinating. In another world, perhaps with a different upbringing, in a different era, my father would likely be a Nobel Prize winner. He is naturally brilliant, with enough grit and toughness to last a lifetime. My mother is The Ultimate; intelligent, sharp and a natural leader with presence and people skills like I have never seen before. She could have been CEO of any company, or President of the United States.

My parents and grandparents couldn't be prouder of the fact that I am a replica of both my mother and father, mixed in one. They also couldn't be prouder of my professional success. Despite all that, however, I know that I am disappointing them.

My mind often switches back and forth between imagining myself being a stay-at-home mom, living next door to my parents, to being on the cover of *Forbes* magazine as the youngest female CEO. I struggle to see both simultaneously. I often share these thoughts with my parents and I can sense that they don't quite know what to do with me; equal parts fascinated and horrified about how I got to be so "complex."

These themes of not wanting to disappoint and trying to balance the multiple sides of myself followed me to the workplace. When I started my career, I worried about how I was being perceived. I didn't want to be labeled as the "bitch," but didn't want to get walked all over. I wondered if others around me viewed me as an equal, or as "one of the guys," or as just another ambitious young girl trying to make it in a man's world. I also struggled with being Penny Phillips vs. Panagiota Filipis. How could I ever relate to my Ivy League colleagues, who went to private school and now lived in fancy apartments on the Upper East Side? I wasn't allowed to go away to college, I still lived at home with my parents, and I secretly carried around an evil eye that my grandparents had given me to ward off jinxes.

Fast-forward five years, and I still sometimes wrestle with "which woman do I want to be," although less than I used to. I had an 'a-ha' moment a few months ago where it hit me that perhaps I didn't have to choose between being Panagiota or Penny, or compromise one dream to pursue another. Maybe, just maybe, I could let all of those things co-exist for a while and see what happened.

As women, we often feel the need to live up to that person, that woman who has been defined for us by our culture, religion and families. We worry that if we deviate from that we will be labeled too rebellious, too independent, too wild -- weird, even.

What has been profound for me is the realization that perhaps I am all of those things. So what? I am also a loving daughter and granddaughter. I am a savvy businesswoman who will one day also be a loving wife and mother. I am a proud Greek-American who will continue to uphold her parents' and grandparents' unwavering commitment to family, religion and culture. I can honor every single aspect of myself and still make my family proud -- because the best parts of me, the parts that have made me who I am at work and in life, are parts that I inherited directly from them.

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