

Son recalls run of his life

By ANTON ZUIKER

Becoming Dad's adult friend



Joseph, left, and Anton Zuiker in the Honolulu Marathon.

It was exciting, but frightening, to be going to live with a parent I had learned was quite human. Many in my generation were (and are still) doing this. Most go back for parent-subsidized rent and the chance to save something, anything.

My move to Hawaii was for a more important investment. I wanted to be a son again. I also wanted to become a friend, a roommate and a running partner to the man I knew very little. When I left Hawaii in July, I had no savings. But I did have a friendship with a redeemed father. I think he stopped feeling

guilt and started feeling successful at fatherhood.

In Hawaii, I worked two jobs. Continuing the Zuiker tradition of "funds," I saved my extra money in an oatmeal canister. Dad always asked me to contribute to the "food fund," but he usually bought groceries regardless of the empty peanut butter jar. My attention was to the "travel fund," a savings to bring my girlfriend to visit. Dad, too, had a girlfriend in a different state, and we often talked about how much relationships had changed and how far they had traveled.

"When I was growing up," he

would say, "we expected to marry the girl next door." Now, he and I were dating women thousands of mile away. On the days the distance seemed overwhelming, Dad would reach over and shake my hand, his habitual way of offering comfort, but also his nonverbal asking for affirmation. Parents, too, need affection from their kids.

It's Dad's touches I remember most — the many handshakes, the back massages after a long day, the way he'd slip me a fiver as I went out for the evening. I get "chicken skin" thinking of the two most memorable.

Leaving my wisdom teeth in a dentist's sink, I had gone home one night with gums still bleeding. But the bleeding wouldn't stop and the next day I was nauseous, dizzy and scared. When I passed out in the shower, I needed care. What I remember is Dad carrying me naked to the couch, where he dressed me and prepared me for an ambulance ride.

When I recovered, I knew then that he loved me, loved me as only a parent can love child. He's carrying me now in mind, and probably still in his heart.

And what a heart he has. At 51, he led me out fast and ambitiously in our first marathon. He wanted to run fast, but I cautioned for a controlled pace. What a role reversal, the young reasoning and the old pushing.

We hadn't trained properly, but 20 miles into the race we were side by side and still running. By 22, he was going ahead and I was faltering. Mile 25 is a stunning mile in Honolulu, where you run along Diamond Head Crater and look down upon surfers in a dazzling sea. I was awed, but alone. And half a mile later, there Dad was stopped and waiting for me, his legs cramping but waiting anyway.

In the final yards of our Athenian adventure, I reached over and held his hand high, tightly. We finished together (though he still claims I competitively stepped over first). The news we delivered was of victory: a father and a son becoming friends in adulthood. It was our defining moment.

Zuiker lives in Cleveland.

"Why did you leave Hawaii?" everyone asks, thinking they know why I moved to that warm, faraway state.

"I came back to be with my girlfriend," I say to answer them, thinking of the reason I left her.

It's a story of the going back to Dad and exploring sonhood, becoming a friend to my father, Joseph, and learning to live as a roommate with a man twice my age.

The eldest of five sons, I was a freshman at John Carroll University when my parents divorced. I understood the pain and betrayal, selfishness and disappointment that led to the dissolution, but recognized their unusual respect and forgiveness for each other. Mom and the brothers stayed in Illinois, while Dad moved to the Virgin Islands.

I saw Father little during my four years at John Carroll. Once I went on a Christmas visit to St. Thomas; everyone asked then, too, about leaving the tropics to return to Cleveland's winter. Few wondered about spending the holiday with only one parent after a lifetime of family mornings around the Christmas tree. It wasn't too bad. After Mass, Dad and I ate holiday pizza on the beach.

The other time I saw him, he was infirm, lying on my mother's couch in Illinois recovering from retina surgery. He looked old, ill and yet still loved by Mom. It was a lesson that some divorces don't really end the love that created a marriage.

As kids do, I dreamed of being like my parents and doing the things they had done. Like Dad, I was planning to join the Peace Corps after college, to travel and make some difference in the world and in myself. I don't, though, want to end divorced. Maybe I went back to him to learn what not to do, also.

As graduation day approached and I was about to get my Peace Corps assignment, Dad suddenly invited me to come to Honolulu, where he now lived. He was tentative, yet eager to have a friend with whom to discover Hawaii.

So I postponed my Peace Corps dream, graduated, cut my long hair, packed two suitcases and said goodbye to my girlfriend.