

In My Shoes

MIA DAY BURROUGHS has to do some sole searching

When my daughter Melissa was in kindergarten, her teacher taught her class the song “I Want to Walk a Mile in Your Shoes” to illustrate the concept of empathy. Melissa came home that day and shared a new song she learned at school, “I Walk Admiring Your Shoes.” Her teacher and I still share chuckles over that misunderstanding.

That event came flashing into my head in a very different context this summer. My daughters and I went to Washington, D.C., to see longtime friends. They live on Capitol Hill in a century-old row house that has been lovingly restored in a neighborhood that has seen both neglect and recent renovation. Their house is a quick walk to the Capitol, the Supreme Court, Union Station, and the Red Line of the Metro.

My children have lived most of their lives in the relatively small town of Chapel Hill; their sole experience with mass transit is the big yellow bus that carts them to school and back. They were intrigued by the D.C. transit system, so the last day of our visit we rode the Metro to the end of the Red Line in the Maryland suburbs and back, just for fun. We got off at Dupont Circle to ride up and then immediately back down one of the world’s largest escalators. We got back on the metro and rode to Capitol Hill with a sense of satisfaction about our choice of offbeat urban adventure.

We then meandered back to my friend’s house, and after a bit we went to get into my Town and Country van to ride over to the Lincoln Memorial. We looked at the location where I was sure I parked my dark green van, only

to see a light green SUV in its place. After several minutes of questioning our sanity, we concluded that the van had been stolen. Officer Bell of the D.C. Police came over, recorded the details of the theft, and very kindly thanked my 7-year-old, Emmy, when she handed him his portrait complete with the inscription “Thank you for Halping Us.”

The next day I rented a car at the airport, gathered up the girls, and set out for our next stop: Jacksonville, N.C. We were going to the wedding of my daughter’s fifth-grade teacher. Although our dress clothes had been safe in my friend’s house, our fancy shoes had disappeared along with the van. We stopped at a mall half an hour south of D.C. and I led the girls on a forced march through

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three shoe departments leaving a series of salespeople stunned in our wake. An hour later we came out of the mall armed with dress shoes, got back on the highway, and were promptly ensnared in a nasty traffic jam.

For the next three hours of driving through stop-and-go traffic, my thoughts rambled from anger at the jerks who stole my van, to wonderment at who would be capable of such a thing, to disbelief that if we hadn't had to stop for new shoes we would have been able to get to the wedding on time. I also mulled the irony that just before our trip I had worked long and hard writing a federal grant to provide mentors to children of prisoners, probationers, and parolees. I placed a bet with myself that at least one of my van thieves fit into that category. Finally, after conferring by cell phone with a friend who confirmed via Mapquest that we had no hope of getting to the wedding on time, I took the right fork at the intersection of I-95 and I-85 and headed for home.

Five days later, the D.C. police called my friends at 2:30 a.m. to report they had found my van in a very poor neighborhood on the edge of the District. The police said that my friends had to get the van immediately or it would be towed and impounded, all at my expense. My dear friends packed their young children into their van and drove through empty streets to collect mine. When they got there the police reported that, most likely, "knuckleheads" had broken into the van, popped out the ignition, started the motor with a screwdriver, and then taken it for a joyride until it ran out of its last fume of gas. While my family was exploring the mass transit system, a group of teenagers was checking out the joy of having its own wheels — if only for a little while.

These kids were smart enough to leave no fingerprints, so our only clues are the items they took and those they left behind. They took surprisingly

little: jumper cables, tools, a fire extinguisher, three pairs of size-eight women's shoes, and three pairs of children's sandals. What they left leaves me feeling very sad: a brick, Brisk iced-tea cans, a bus transfer pass, carvings in the armrests and seat cushions, a bobby pin with rhinestones, and a beat-up pair of women's shoes — size eight-and-half.

Somewhere in Washington, D.C., is a teenaged girl with relatively big feet walking in and, perhaps, even admiring my shoes. I wonder if she is thinking about their former owner. Meanwhile, I am left looking at her rhinestone bobby pin and her shoes, knowing that never in my life have I even had to consider wearing shoes as worn-down as hers.

Apart from money, I wonder what was missing in her life that led her to participate in a serious crime. Where were her Mom and Dad? Were they working to make ends meet, wandering around

strung-out on drugs, or in jail? Was she supposed to be in a summer camp that was canceled due to budget cuts? Was she without a moral compass to help her determine right from wrong, or was she coerced by older buddies?

We will never know the answers to those questions. My educated guesses will keep me going through long hours of writing grants for programs designed to take kids off the streets and put them into meaningful, life-changing activities and relationships. If I ever have a bad day and consider changing careers, one glance at those shoes will keep me straight. •

Somewhere in Washington, D.C., is a teenaged girl with relatively big feet walking in my shoes.



Mia Day Burroughs lives in Chapel Hill and writes grant proposals for non-profits that serve disadvantaged youth. She spends the balance of her time providing van service for her splendid children. Her next adventure will be trolling junkyards in search of replacement van parts.



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