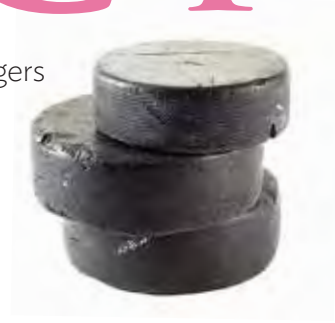


PERFECT PRESENT

By Curtis Rogers



Every August my family and I discuss how we are going to cut back on Christmas presents this year, and every December we forget what we talked about in August. I understand this situation isn't limited to just our family.

Presents are a huge part of the holiday, but personally, I am past the receiving part. I am lucky. I have all I need and a good portion of what I want. I get the most satisfaction from watching my family get presents. I also enjoy watching people give presents. Sometimes the right present given by a specific person to the perfect recipient can be magical. On one occasion, it was the highlight of my Christmas.

My oldest son, Parker, is a hockey nut. He has played since he was 5 and loved the game since I took him to his first Nanook game when he was almost 3. The lessons he learned playing hockey, on the ice and as a teammate, are a big part of who he is. As he got older, sports in general, and hockey specifically, became an avenue for communication between us and a way to maintain a connection. It was what we had in common when he was a teenager.

Fifteen is an awkward age for a kid at Christmas. You start getting more clothes and fewer toys as you come closer to adulthood, but you don't really have the earning power to buy presents on your own. We told him we would help, but he was still struggling with what to get his family for Christmas, especially my wife's mother, his granny. I told him that any gift is appropriate if the thought is there. I wasn't sure he knew what I meant. I underestimated him.

A few weeks before Christmas we were in a local hockey store. I don't think we had any reason to be there other than the fact that it was a hockey store. You don't need a reason to go to a hockey store. It's cool to just go and absorb hockey vibes. Try it. Really.

I looked around for Parker and found him in the stick section. He loves hockey sticks. His eyes light up when he thinks about his old hockey sticks the way some guys' eyes light up when they reminisce about old girlfriends. He can talk about sticks all day.

Parker was looking at a rack of fiberglass sticks. The sticks were pink.

The manufacturer TPS puts out a special series of sticks in honor of hockey moms. These particular sticks were pink to promote breast cancer awareness. They were very pink and had the trademark pink breast cancer awareness ribbon painted on them. I watched as Parker hefted the stick. He tested the stiffness. He looked closely at the blade. He put the stick back. He seemed to be thinking for a long time. We paid for the tape or whatever it was we bought as a token reason for going to the hockey store and left. On the way home he was quiet. He turned to me and said, "I have an idea."

The thought that counts

My mother-in-law is a strong woman. She has had to be in order to beat breast cancer multiple times. Those fights have left her scarred but not beaten. She carries the scars with a pride and a sense of humor that inspire all of us. Those qualities were not lost on Parker.

"Dad," he said. "I would like to get a hockey stick for Granny for Christmas."

"A hockey stick?" I asked. "Really? Maybe you can teach her a wrist shot." That made me laugh.

"Yeah, the breast-cancer stick. The pink one," he answered.

"I think she'd like that," I said.

"Well," he smiled, "I was thinking that I could play a game with it, then give it to her."

I looked at him. "I guess we could get her to a game, and she could watch you play with it."

He nodded then smiled again. "The Christmas tournament would work," he said. "That way Chip and Lacy would be here too."

My wife's sister and brother would be flying in for Christmas. With luck there would be a game after they arrived but before Christmas. Parker sat back and smiled again. A plan was coming together.

We got home and checked the schedule. Sure enough, there was a game that would work. Parker looked at me.

"I'm going to need some help with the stick," he said.

I assured him I would get the stick for him. I told my wife about the plan.

"Parker thought of this?" she asked. She didn't mean anything by the question. Parker was a very thoughtful and sweet kid. However, he was a teenager. He was sometimes less than communicative. Besides, a thought and sentiment like this coming from anybody was noteworthy.

The next day Parker asked if I could get him some pink ribbons. He would wear one on his jersey for the game, and explain his plan to his teammates to see if they would wear them also.

I went to the hockey store to get the stick. I selected one and headed to the counter.

"You have a daughter playing?" the clerk, a man about 10 years older than me, asked.

"No," I answered. "A son, actually."

He looked at me over his glasses.

I explained. He smiled and gave me a 10 percent discount on the stick. "That's a pretty amazing present," he said. "Tell your son I said well done and Merry Christmas."

Christmas got closer. Our family members arrived. I got the pink-ribbon stickers. The day before the game, I told Parker I was proud of him. He just smiled. He gave me a sealed card with instructions to give it to his grandmother just before the game started.

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The game was on Dec. 23. We bundled the whole group up and drove two cars to the arena for the game. We found our seats, and Parker's team took to the ice for warm-ups. He had his pink stick.

Mom was sitting in front of me. I leaned over and handed her the card. "Parker wanted me to give this to you, Mom," I said. She looked out at Parker. He had skated closer to the glass and was watching. I could see a pink ribbon on his chest. Several other boys were wearing them as well. "What is that on his chest?" Mom asked.

"Just read, Mom," my wife said.

She opened the card. I didn't read all of it, but I did read this: "Granny, this is my Christmas present to you. For this game I am using a pink hockey stick in honor of Breast Cancer Awareness. I am also wearing a pink Breast Cancer Awareness Ribbon.

After the game, I will give you the stick and you can keep it."

He went on to tell her that he loved her and that he was proud of her. He explained that several of his teammates were also wearing pink ribbons. She looked up, and Parker waved at her and skated to his bench.

I love Mom dearly. She is a wonderful, loving woman; however, she doesn't always have a pretty cry face. She tried her best as she watched Parker skate away. She read the card again and we looked for the boys who were wearing the ribbons. Almost all of them were.

The game started, and about seven minutes in Parker got the puck to the goalie's left and scored on a wrist shot. He was mobbed by his teammates, as is the custom. After their congratulations he skated to the bench. He turned slightly and came to

the glass and waved at his granny. More cry face.

His team won the game. He scored two goals and had a couple of assists. We all gathered outside the locker room to wait for the boys to change. Mom was watching the Zamboni clear the ice when Parker came out. He walked up to her and touched her shoulder. She turned, and he gave her his stick.

I looked around. Mom wasn't the only one with bad cry face.

Gifts are wonderful things, but without thought and sentiment they are just objects. Ever see a department store Christmas tree display with fake presents? When I see them I am almost uncomfortable. The packages are sterile and cold. They don't have any warmth because they weren't placed with love. There was no thought behind them. They are just empty boxes. Love makes an object a gift. It made a pink hockey stick the perfect present. ❧

Curtis Rogers takes care of his two sons, Charlie and Eli, when he isn't in history and political science classes at UAF. He is married to Margaret. In 2007 he retired from the Alaska Air National Guard after 25 years in uniform. Besides being a dad and student he writes a blog, www.thissideofthediaper.wordpress.com, where a version of this story originally appeared in December 2012. The couple's oldest son, Parker, is a student in Nebraska.

