

You Can't Wear That To My Interview!

By Harvey Hunt

Being the parent of a teenager makes you feel like the rope in a tug-of war. Adolescents are constantly pulled one way by the struggle to be independent of mom and dad and then the other by the constant peer pressure to “fit in.” You, loving parent, are caught in the middle. One minute you're told you're out of touch or not cool, like some other parents the next minute you're soothing a bruised ego. All the parenting books in the world, not even Dr. Phil, are going to have all the answers. The best thing to do when things get rough is to start by taking a big deep breath and repeat to yourself – growing up is at least as difficult as being a parent.

Let me share with you one small example of what I mean. When my son Shelby was in middle school he decided that he wanted to attend the very academic and prestigious Jesuit High School in our community. I cannot imagine where he got the idea we are not Catholics and involved in public education. It may have been due in part to the influence of one of his sister's first boyfriends coupled with the desire to stand out from the crowd.

Shelby inherited some of my educational challenges and struggled through most of elementary school, but hit his stride in middle school. In my day he would be called a late bloomer. But from an early age he had unmatched determination. When it came to getting what he wanted he was relentless. Consequently, when he decided

that Jesuit high school was right for him there was no stopping him. It became more of an obsession than a goal.

On our most positive of days my wife and I were ambivalent about the idea. Sandy had been a teacher and I worked for the state department of education so we didn't like the idea of "opting out". We were more concerned about what the impact would be on Shelby if he were not admitted. In the end we put these issues aside and were willing to let him attend if he could meet the academic and other requirements.

A major part of the admission process was the "applicant and parenting interview," a day I will never forget.

As I recall the day of the interview was one of those really pleasant spring days in Sacramento after the damp cold of winter and before the blazing heat of summer. The stakes were high. This was the final hurdle. The tension around the house was palpable. All that remained, in Shelby's mind, was to make a good impression on the school officials and he would be in. However, mom and dad were part of this interview also and they were not to be trusted. They had never really left the '60s behind and this made him very very nervous. They were liable to do or say anything and embarrass him. He told his mother early on that she could only wear two colors and they couldn't be too bright.

On this fateful day I was in a lighthearted mood and decided this the perfect time to break out my new spring clothes. I had just the right combination. It consisted of light blue dress shirt, darker blue slacks, pink and blue striped tie, a blue

and white striped seersucker sport coat and all topped off with blue and white saddle shoes.

I took plenty of time to get ready and when I came down the stairs to show off my perfectly coordinated outfit I felt I could put Gatsby to shame. The shoes must have been the first thing Shelby saw. The look on his face was one of sheer terror. "You," he said, "cannot wear those shoes to MY interview! I'll never get in if you dress like that!"

He had his heart set on making a just the right impression so I took that deep breath and, to relieve his anxiety, I went back upstairs and put on a pair of conservative brown loafers. They didn't even go with my outfit. So much for sartorial splendor!

Off we went to the school. The interviews were in the gym. There were at least a hundred families there all looking quite serious. We registered and waited our turn to meet with a faculty member. When our turn came our interviewer introduced himself as the head of the social studies and history department. He led us to a small table at the other end of the gym where we had a very pleasant chat. He seemed genuinely interested our backgrounds in education.

He asked Shelby a few general questions such as what were his favorite subjects and why he wanted to go to Jesuit. Questions we had anticipated and carefully rehearsed. When we were finished he asked if there was anything else we wanted to know or if we had any additional questions. We said that we didn't, but I said that I

did have a request that might sound a bit unusual. I told him had been admiring his shoes; and wondered if I could have a closer look. He stood up and walked away from his desk while telling us with some enthusiasm that they were new and that this was his first opportunity he had to wear them.

He was wearing the very same blue and white saddle shoes that I had been told not to wear to the interview. Not similar mind you. Not a more muted. Not a more conservative color. No, the same exact same shoes!

I couldn't tell him the truth about why I wanted to see his shoes. It would have been overkill. I made up something about having been looking for something to go with my sport coat I was wearing and left it at that.

The ride home I was feeling pretty smug while everyone else was quiet. When we reached the house we all agreed that we had handled the interview quite well and that we should celebrate. We decided that our reward would be dinner at our favorite Mexican restaurant. Before we left though, I went upstairs and put back on my blue and white saddle shoes.