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Too often we see only the flashiest acts of charity and bravery as heroism worth celebrating. To me, heroism is more personal. Heroism is about endurance, protection, and unconditional love. No one checks as many of those boxes as my mom.

For as long as I can remember, something dark always loomed over our family. Before my teenage years, domestic violence was a regular part of our lives. One of my clearest childhood memories is of my mom putting my sister and me into the car after a particularly bad incident and taking us to our grandparents' house. I never knew the extent of everything that had happened, but I knew I was safe and protected because she was calm and collected. Only now do I understand how hard it must've been for her, but at the time, we never saw it. Even when the worst was over, the aftermath brought years of legal battles, which too often ended in courtrooms that didn't see the whole truth or give us the outcomes I hoped for. Through all of that, my mom never once complained about the financial cost or the difficulty of our journey.

I have never seen my mom break down or expect me to carry her burdens. Through everything, she acted as a constant wall of protection so my sister and I could feel safe. When the man I now call my dad began stepping into our lives, she prioritized our hearts above everything else, making it clear that he would not stay if we didn't feel completely comfortable, respected, and secure or if we didn't approve of him. She always made sure we knew that her family was ours too.

Even though the hardest days are behind us, whenever I lose my footing or my grades start to slip, she is right there to catch me and keep me honest with myself. She never demands the impossible, but she refuses to let me settle for anything less than my potential. She always reminds me that if I truly give something my best effort, she could never be disappointed. She always knows when I am capable of more.

My mom is my biggest hero because she faced the hardest parts of my life and answered them with courage. She is the reason I am here today, because she constantly shielded us from the worst of the abuse. When most people think of heroes, they picture someone risking their lives to save others. I don't have to imagine what a hero looks like. I've been calling mine "Mom" my entire life.