

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Mothering After the Kid is Gone

By Wendy Lichtman

"A GUY I grew up with got hit by a truck in London because he looked the wrong way before he crossed the street," I told my 20-year-old son the evening before he left to travel through Europe. "So remember," I said as he threw a basketball into the hoop that's attached to our garage, "you need to look right first, not left, when they drive on the opposite side of the street." "I'm not going to England," he reminded me, dribbling the ball low and fast. "Still," I explained, "it's an example of a cross-cultural danger. It's a metaphor: Things can come at you from the other direction, and I want you prepared. That guy is dead." Lev tossed the ball against the backboard and jumped to tip it into the basket. "How embarrassing," he said.

This talk is not going well, I thought. I sat on the wooden steps of my back porch, untied and retied my running shoes, and tried to decide what I really wanted to say. I am not, to tell the truth, the least bit concerned about my son crossing the street safely -- he was the one who had stopped me from getting on the moving sidewalk in the wrong direction when we arrived at Heathrow Airport three years ago. "Stay to your left here," he'd said, grabbing my arm and saving me from heading face first into a pile of gliding Englishmen.

LIKE MOST PARENTS of young adults, I'm more worried about things that are not as easy to speak about as the flow of traffic: I'm afraid he'll use illegal drugs and get locked up in a Spanish jail. I'm scared he'll ride a motorcycle without wearing a helmet and crack his skull open. I'm terrified he'll have unprotected sex and get AIDS.

When I looked up from my shoes, Lev was standing in front of me spinning the ball on one finger. In his hands a basketball looks as if it's magnetic -- it sticks to his palm, it rolls up his arm, it comes back to him from any surface. "I want you to promise me that you'll be careful about drugs, sex and rock 'n' roll," I said, trying not to sound too heavy-handed, trying, actually, to be as graceful with him as he is with a basketball.

Lev looked at me and nodded. "I'll give up rock 'n' roll all summer," he said, smiling and tossing the ball, lightly, into my open hands.

AND MAYBE I should have stopped there -- he understood that I was scared, and I understood that anything else I said would probably be information he already knew.

But I couldn't be certain. What I presume my son knows is very often wrong now. He certainly knows how to pay attention and think quickly and hop on a moving sidewalk in the right direction, but I don't believe he knows about the fragility of life. I don't believe he's supposed to know that yet.

I didn't. At his age I drove a car with no seat belts and a bicycle with no brakes, and when those weren't available, so I hitchhiked to class. I walked alone in the dark to show that women could take back the night, and I swallowed a tab of something bitter because a friend said it would help me write poetry.

I think it's important, at my son's stage of life, to imagine that anything is possible -- to put on a backpack and travel the world. And I think it's important, at my stage of life, to teach caution -- to say be careful; please, dear child, be very, very careful.

So that evening, I told my son about Spanish jails even though I know absolutely nothing about Spanish jails, I reminded him that just because there are no helmet laws in a country doesn't mean there are no motorcycle accidents there, and I spoke, one more time, about sexually transmitted diseases.

Then I pulled on my sweater and watched him play ball.