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GROWING THE FAMILY LEGACY

Chris Engebo

Erik had tagged along with me many times to the same secret spot. He was getting older now, and this season he got his very own steelhead fly rod, instead of the flimsy little Snoopy rod he used to have. He had unusual patience for a ten-year-old—in a dozen steelheading trips, he had not even gotten a bite, but he kept coming. He'd grow a bit impatient from time to time, but he was sticking with it. I'd hooked a few over those trips and always offered the rod to him, but he wanted to do it himself.

On a late summer morning, Erik was getting his casts all wrong. His line spent more time tangled in the bushes and tree branches behind him than it did floating on the water. He'd done a great job of tying his own flies, but they needed to be in the water to attract a big shiny brute with an appetite.

It was getting to him. He stood there fuming—I could almost see the frustration building up inside of him. He must have thought for a moment about throwing that fly rod as far as he could, but his frustration waned and culminated only in a groan.

I always tried to encourage him, but it's hard to convince a kid having so much trouble that it's going to be okay. I gave it a shot, anyway: "It takes a long time and a lot of patience, Erik. It's okay if you get frustrated, but hang in there."

He thought about it awhile before asking, "How long was it 'til you caught your first one on your own, Dad?"

"Seems to me it was a couple seasons, although Grandpa might say it was longer."

I gave him a couple of reminder lessons, and pointed out a riffle for him to target. He swung his rod a couple of times and let the line fly. Not bad—he was regaining a little confidence. Then he got a tough snag, right behind a large rock. He jerked and tugged, and finally the line released, but he lost his fly.

"Why don't you tie on one of those bright ones you did last night?" He took my advice and pulled one out of his fly box. I was really just curious about the pattern—it was one

Erik had come up with on his own. It was bright purple and pink, and in a minute, he had it ready.

Erik cast, and just as I reminded him to mend the line, he got snagged again. Then I saw a bright flash in the water and looked at him—I could tell by the arch of his eyebrows above his sunglasses and his gaping mouth that he was the stunned recipient of a strong steelhead strike.

The line flew off his reel as the fish shot downstream.

“Don’t let her get to those rapids if you can help it!” I shouted my reminder. As I watched, I remembered the rush of adrenaline I’d felt when I hooked my first steelhead on the fly, and I knew that Erik was in his own world now, unlikely to hear anything I said.

The fish cut back just before reaching the tail of the pool where the rapids began, and Erik began reeling like a pro. I was glad he had that 8-weight rod—a beginner with a smaller rod probably couldn’t have handled this beauty. He fought the fish for what seemed like hours, but was probably ten minutes. Finally, she began to tire, and he got her close to the bank. She was a chrome-bright wild hen, and I gently held her while slipping the hook out with my pliers. She waited and rested for just a moment, then swam swiftly back downstream.

I looked at Erik. I don’t know which one of us had the bigger smile. “That was awesome, Dad!”

“Yeah, I’d say it was. Good job, Erik. That was a beautiful fish! You don’t see ‘em like that too often.”

“Dad, does this make me a real fly fisherman now?”

“Well, I thought you were a real fly fisherman before. But I’d say that now you’re definitely a real fly fisherman in anybody’s book.”

All these years later, I’ll never forget that smile. I get a nice reminder of it whenever I fish with Erik and he hooks one. There was one smile that was even better: his nine-year-old daughter Jenny’s when she aced us both and got her first steelhead last summer.