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Women's Health

Save the Children: Julianne Moore on U.S. Poverty, Being 50, and Losing Her Mom

Actress/author Julianne Moore puts her heart into family, career, and improving children's lives this Valentine's Day.

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Interviewing Julianne Moore is not exactly work. It's more like hanging out with your coolest, most supportive mom friend. She draws out your confidences, and soon you're gossiping about the stuff all women go through when they're juggling kids, job, aging parents, and a changing body and sense of self. "You too?" "Oh, that happened to me and..." "Really? No way!"

Moore's New York City home, however, doesn't particularly resemble my mom friends' abodes, I realized when I walked into her West Village townhouse on a balmy September day. The parlor floor looks like an art gallery plunked down in the middle of a Montana mountain lodge, with faux animal hide chairs, a reclaimed tree-trunk coffee table, and giant framed art photos. One of the most arresting photos, depicting an elderly African-American woman in her 1950s-era kitchen, hangs above wide-planked, dark wood floors. (Yes, while I'm there, a photography crew from *Architectural Digest* is onsite shooting in the back garden.)

Despite the designer touches, this is also a home ringing with the life that Moore, 51, and her husband, movie director Bart Freundlich, have built together. Best known for her achingly vulnerable roles in films like *Far From Heaven*, *Boogie Nights*, and *The Kids Are All Right*, Moore opens the door with a warm, easy smile and immediately brings in two bottles of "bubbly water," warning that "it's lemony, just so you're not surprised." She points out an enormous photo in the hallway, one in a series called the *Apron Project* that pays tribute to that vanishing kitchen-clothing staple and the domestic lives of the women who once wore aprons.

Before sitting, Moore jokes with her 9-year-old daughter, Liv, and sends her off with a snack to do her homework. Proudly, she shows off the latest picture of her kids, Liv and 14-year-old Caleb, sporting goofy grins, ball caps, and matching T-shirts at summer camp. Freundlich saunters in wearing cargo shorts and a backpack and calls down to joke with Liv at work on the floor below.

Casual in a moss-green top and soft chocolate-brown pants, Moore settles herself on the couch with her black Labrador-terrier mix, Cherry, sniffing around her toes as she talks. Her calm manner belies her frenzied schedule. Yesterday, the four-time Academy Award nominee finished shooting *What Maisie Knew*, a modern retelling of the Henry James novel. On Monday, she starts a tour for her new book, the third in the popular *Freckleface Strawberry* children's series. Then she heads to upstate New York to resume filming *The English Teacher*, with actor Greg Kinnear.

Julianne Moore: Champion for Children

She's also right in the thick of planning the release of custom-designed Valentine's Day cards for Save the Children, the 80-year-old nonprofit that provides education, nutrition, and health programs for children living in poverty around the world (savethechildren.org).

Julianne Moore: Champion for Children continued...

As a Save the Children artist ambassador, Moore helps promote the annual Valentine's Day card sale campaign to raise funds for kids' initiatives in the United States. One, called Literacy Block, gives kindergartners through eighth-graders supported activities that help them grow as readers with guided independent reading practice, fluency-building support, and listening to books read aloud.

Moore's interest is to do something about the link between poverty and literacy. Research shows that by age 4, poor children are 18 months behind their peers developmentally. At age 10, this gap persists. When they grow up, that difference in skills matters; people with low levels of education have higher rates of unemployment.

"Our literacy work encompasses just about everything we do, from early childhood education to early cognitive skills, all with the goal that by the time they're in fourth grade, kids are no longer learning to read, but reading to learn," says Jennifer Kaleba, director of marketing and communications for Save the Children's U.S. programs.

"Valentine's Day is as big as Halloween for kids," Moore says. "I was very involved with Trick-or-Treat for UNICEF as a kid, and I thought, 'Why don't we attach something about U.S. poverty to Valentine's Day and allow kids to help one another?'"

Past cards have featured children's art, but this year the cards will be recognizable to many parents, designed by favorite children's book illustrators such as Mo Willems (*Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!*), Ian Falconer (*Olivia*), Kevin Henkes (*Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*), Brian Selznick (*The Invention of Hugo Cabret*), and LeUyen Pham, who illustrates Moore's own *Freckleface Strawberry* series, inspired by her childhood nickname.

Moore on Education Equality

The days when she was "Freckleface Strawberry" in school were also the days Moore developed an early sense of the inequality in kids' education. Her military family moved often, and she attended at least nine schools -- some on a military base but most of them local public schools.

"The one thing I knew as a child was it's not fair that the education you get depends on where you live," she recalls. "We were all over the South, and then we lived in Nebraska for awhile, and I saw what schools were like in areas that were just strapped. Then I went to school in Alaska, where the public elementary school served an array of economic needs. The lieutenant governor's kid was in my class, and so was a little girl from the Native American community who had fetal alcohol syndrome."

From there, Moore's family -- her father eventually became a military judge, while her mother was a social worker -- moved to Westchester County, N.Y. "There, everything was so opulent, and nobody appeared to have any needs at all."

Moore on Education Equality continued...

So when her teachers taught the lesson that America is a land of equal opportunity, young Julianne was skeptical. "I'm looking around, going, 'That's not true.' I saw the disparity right in front of me," she says. "We're all supposed to have an equal education, but it really depends on the tax bracket for the county you live in."

After earning her bachelor of fine arts degree in acting from Boston University's School of Theatre, Moore went on to get her big break in television with a dual role as Frannie Hughes and her "evil twin" Sabrina on the now-defunct soap opera *As the World Turns*. She then landed a series of supporting roles in feature films like *Benny & Joon*, *The Fugitive*, and *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*. The late 1990s and early 2000s were Moore's breakout season, as she went from one Academy Award-nominated role to another: Cathy Whitaker in *Far From Heaven*, Amber Waves in *Boogie Nights*, Sarah Miles in *The End of the Affair*, and Laura Brown in *The Hours*. Along the way, she met Freundlich when he directed her in 1997's *The Myth of Fingerprints*. She appears next as Sarah Palin in HBO's *Game Change*, based on the book by the same name, in March.

But she never forgot what she'd learned as an "Army brat." Years later, as charities came calling for a bit of her time, Moore elected to work with Save the Children on programs aimed at alleviating poverty among U.S. children.

"I have a friend who knew someone working with Save the Children, and he told me about all the places I could go and help in Asia and Africa. But I said my area of interest is the United States," she says. "Part of the deal with being American is that we're supposed to go out and help everybody in the rest of the world, but to do that we have to help the children here."

That's a lesson she's always taught her own kids. When Liv was younger, her elementary school did their own card campaign, donating the proceeds to buy toys for a nursery school wiped out in a tornado. "My daughter is a great bake sale person," she says. "She'll make cookies and sit on the stoop with a sign saying 'Bake sale for Japan!'"

How the Economy Affects Children

As America's economic recession lurches into its fourth year, the tentacles of poverty are squeezing more U.S. kids. "The common notion of poverty is the child in the ghetto, and it's true that about 29% of kids in major cities live in poverty," says Beth Mattingly, PhD, director of research on vulnerable families at the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire. "But 1 in 4 kids in rural America is growing up in poverty, too." Mattingly adds that between 2009 and 2010, an additional 1 million American children became poor. How can you help? Mattingly offers some tips:

How the Economy Affects Children continued...

Speak up. Urge your senator, representative, and state legislators to vote for programs that are good for children, such as child-care subsidies for low-income working families, pre-kindergarten programs, and school-based health centers. For more policy ideas, visit the National Center for Children in Poverty (nccp.org) and the Birth to Five Policy Alliance (birthtofivepolicy.org).

Take heart. Buy Valentine's Day cards from Save the Children (available at savethechildren.org/valentines). Proceeds support Save the Children's U.S. education programs.

Teach your children. Give them the opportunity to give back, like Moore does with her kids. One great option: Milk + Bookies (milkandbookies.org), a nonprofit organization that gets children involved in choosing and donating books to kids who don't have them. Consider making the next birthday celebration a "Milk and Bookies" party -- kids donate books instead of bringing presents.

The 'Freckleface Strawberry' Series

Maybe it's because she's maintained a redhead's vigilance about the sun for most of her life, but Moore appears years younger than her age -- her skin is beautiful (she's famously sworn that she won't use Botox or go under the knife). But she's tired of talking about the looks aspect of turning 50.

"The beauty questions are sort of tedious," she says. "It's not about the outside. The thing about 50 is that you've clearly reached a point where you have more of your life behind you than ahead of you, and that's a very different place to be in. You're thinking, 'I've done most of it.' I don't like that feeling. But it makes you evaluate your life and go, 'Am I doing what I want to do? Am I spending my time the way I want?'"

One of the reasons Moore began writing the *Freckleface Strawberry* books in 2007 -- the latest one, *Best Friends Forever*, is the third in the series -- was to explore something new. Spun off into a popular kids' musical, the series quickly became a modern classic, beloved by parents who want to guide their kids in navigating the trauma of being "different" and learn to help themselves.

"When I started working on the first book, my son Caleb was 7. That's the age when they really start to notice things about themselves that are different," Moore says. "He had new teeth coming in and he thought they were too big. But he was perfect! I began thinking about that, and remembered I had this awful nickname as a kid ... and that's where the idea for the book came from."

Moore says she likes the children in her books to solve their own problems. "I don't want the adults coming in and fixing things for them." In the second book, *Freckleface Strawberry and the Dodgeball Bully*, the heroine is terrified of a bigger boy and the balls he hurls during that awful recess game. "So she pretends to be a monster. She's very imaginative, and that's where she feels her own power. And then she roars at the little boy, and he's scared. He's someone who's good with physical things but not imaginary things."

Moore confesses she still hates her freckles. "I really don't like them at all," she says. "My hair and my freckles are still the same, and I don't like them, but they're at the bottom of the list now, even though when I was 7, they were at the top. I wanted to write a book that dealt with that -- that the things that loom large in childhood and seem impossible when you're little don't necessarily go away, but you find other things that you care about more, like family." (The final image in *Freckleface Strawberry* is a humorous, loving take on grown-up "Freckleface," cuddling on the couch with her husband and studying her kids' skin for freckles.)

A Daughter's Loss: Moore's Mother Dies

Always close to her family, Moore has turned to them even more since the sudden death of her mother, Anne Love Smith, in April 2009. "It was horrible, completely out of the blue," Moore says. "She collapsed at work, went into the hospital, and died the next day. I'm still not over the shock of her being there one day and the next day gone. My dad called me that night at midnight, and she was fine at the hospital. The next morning she couldn't get on the phone because she was short of breath, but then later I was able to talk to her. She said, 'Hi, Julie,' and that was the last time I talked to her."

Moore was devastated. "I stopped sleeping. I didn't sleep at all. I didn't know what to do about it," she says. Eventually, a combination of acupuncture, therapy, and yoga -- accompanied by time spent with friends and some good wine -- helped her through the loss. "When you go through big life stuff like that, you have to throw everything you can at it." Ashtanga yoga is her favorite de-stressor. "It's a place where I can be quiet in my head, but I also have to concentrate so hard, it's like a form of meditation. If you let your mind wander, you fall over."

Moore's choice of several support sources was a wise approach, says Robert Hedaya, MD, a clinical professor of psychiatry at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. "The death of her mother is one of the most vulnerable times in a woman's life. That's the hardest time to take care of yourself, but it's also the most important time. That means finding a support system and setting time aside for relationships that matter."

For Moore, one of those relationships is with her younger sister, Valerie. Remember that crazy schedule Moore is juggling? She just learned she has to sandwich one more commitment in between wrapping up the film on Wednesday and starting her book tour on Monday: a lightning-fast jaunt to Paris with Valerie. "It's not making any sense for me to go, I should really not go, but I feel like, 'Why not?' You could be dead, so just do it. That's my attitude now. Jam those things in. Just do it."

Missing Mom: Coping With the Loss of a Mother

For many women, the death of a mother is a unique and devastating loss they continue struggling with as the years go by. If

you're a "motherless mother," like Julianne Moore, how can you cope?

Take time to heal. Don't put pressure on yourself to "get over it." "The acute phase of grief may take from three to six months, but when a mother is lost, that grieving process can continue for years," says Elisabeth Kunkel, MD, a professor of psychiatry at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia. That's OK -- as long as extended grieving isn't keeping you from functioning in your life.

Set the date. Be especially gentle with yourself around birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays -- times when the loss of Mom can be particularly acute.

Seek out role models. Reach out to female mentors -- older women who can never replace mom but can provide some of the same life experience, support, and guidance. "Women seem to find 'other mothers' when they lose their own," says Hedaya. "It might be at church, at work, or in a support group. You want someone who's from a different generation, whom you respect and trust."

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