

Mitzvah Hero Project – Avital Sutin

Laura Schroff served as an amazing mitzvah hero. She befriended a young boy named Maurice in New York City in the late-1980s. Ms. Schroff played a big role in Maurice's life in the years following their first meeting. Her acts of kindness helped guide Maurice in a better direction and develop him into the adult he is today.

Laura Schroff was born in New York in 1951. She grew up in Huntington Station, which is a town on Long Island. She attended Walt Whitman High School in Huntington Station. Laura always had a warm home and food to eat but her childhood was not easy. Her parents were Italian, her father's name was Nunzie and her mother's name was Marie. She had four siblings, Annette, Frank, Nancy, and Steven. Together they were the five Carino children. Laura's father, Nunzie, worked very hard to provide for his family and made sure they had what they needed. At one point during her childhood he worked as a bartender, and sometimes he would drink too much with his customers. Occasionally he would come home and have angry rages. This would affect Laura and her siblings, but her mother was always there for them and protected them in the difficult times.

Growing up, Laura admired John F. Kennedy, who was the president at the time of her childhood. Later in life, Laura became a businesswoman in New York City, working for newspapers and magazines such as USA Today. One day, while taking a walk, Laura was approached by an 11 year-old panhandler who asked for spare change because he was hungry. At the beginning, she walked away. However something led her to turn back to Maurice. She was crossing the street, but stopped and went back to the boy. Instead of money, she offered to take him to McDonalds to buy him a meal. Maurice gladly accepted and together they went to McDonalds. This led to an everlasting friendship, and the beginning of many mitzvot. Every Monday they would get together, either to eat out or to eat dinner at Laura's apartment.

Maurice was a boy growing up in New York City whose parents were drug dealers and addicts, and he lived in an unsafe and bad environment. Maurice's father left his mother, grandmother, and two sisters when Maurice was only six years old. Maurice did not have a stable home, he often had to live in welfare hotels or shelters and even on the streets. At eleven years old, Maurice went to the streets to beg for money to buy food for himself. He was lucky one day to be asking for money and meeting Laura on the street. Little did he know that this meeting would change his life.

As their friendship grew stronger, they played a bigger in each other's lives. Laura was concerned that Maurice did not have food and would often go hungry. She offered to help Maurice with lunch at school by either providing him money or giving him school lunches. He told her that he didn't want the money, but instead he wanted her to provide him lunch in a brown paper bag. When Laura asked why a brown paper bag, Maurice explained that when a child brought lunch in a brown paper bag it meant that someone cared for him. Every day he would come to her building on his way to school and take the lunch she prepared for him from the doorman.

Laura wanted Maurice to be happy, and would treat him with special things occasionally. One time, she got tickets from her boss to a Mets game. Maurice was very happy, but Laura wanted get permission from his mother so she could take him in her car. She gave Maurice a permission slip to be signed, but he never brought it back. She brought a permission slip to where he lived. There she met his mother, Darcella, who could barely communicate because of her addiction. Maurice's grandmother, Rose, signed the permission slip so Maurice could be happy. Another thing that Laura did that made Maurice happy was to take him to her sister Annette's house. Annette and her husband and her three children lived in Greenlawn, NY. Annette had a son named Derek who was around the same age as Maurice. The two of them got along very well and became good friends. Laura and Maurice would go to Greenlawn for holidays and events and were sometimes joined by other members of the Carino family. When they got together with Annette's family Maurice always joined in, and he realized what it felt like to be part of a real family. Whenever he was at Annette's house he would ride bikes with Derek, but he never had a bike of his own. Laura got him a bike of his own which stayed at the bike room of Laura's apartment building. One night Maurice called Laura telling her that his bike was stolen. This was one of his best presents and it was stolen.

Maurice was proud to go to school. Many children living a life like his weren't always able to go to school. Maurice got into fights at school, but after he met Laura he fought less and became a better student. When the time for parent-teacher conferences came, Maurice didn't want Darcella, his mother, to go. Instead he asked Laura to come, and she gladly agreed. Maurice's teacher, Ms. Kim House, told Laura how Maurice came late and didn't do his homework. After Maurice explained to her that he had no clock and didn't know what time it was, Laura bought him a watch and urged him to do his homework, which he did. In my interview with Ms. Schroff she told me how they found Ms. House years later while

writing the book, *An Invisible Thread*, about their relationship. When they tried to contact her, they called every House in the phonebook but could not reach her. Then Maurice went to his old school to find out that Ms. House retired. One thing the school did not tell Maurice is that she was now a substitute teacher. A few weeks later Maurice's daughter, Princess, went to school and she had Ms. House as her substitute teacher. When Ms. House was calling out attendance she read out Mazyck and she asked if she knew Maurice, and Princess told her that it was her father. Ms. House asked if she knew about a lady that he knew as a child, and she told her that Laura was actually writing a book with Maurice and gave Ms. House Maurice's phone number.

After a while, Maurice began to feel like a son to Laura. They celebrated a lot of special events together. For instance, every Christmas Maurice and Laura would get together. One year Laura made Maurice write a letter to Santa Claus, and at the top of his list was a remote controlled car. That Christmas when Laura's sister Nancy also joined them, Maurice unwrapped his remote control car from Laura. Another time Laura invited Maurice and her whole family to watch the Thanksgiving parade from the outdoor space in her building. Everyone was there, including her father Nunzie. They watched the floats pass by as the kids all cheered. I asked her when her friends and co-workers doubted her connection with Maurice, if she ever doubted it too. Her answer was absolutely not and that she knew that they were meant to be in each other's lives. Even the doorman at Laura's building treated Maurice in an unfair way because of his race, age, and shabby clothes. Laura confronted the doorman and told him how Maurice is her friend and he should be treated like all of her other friends.

Later, when Maurice was in his late teenage years, he and Laura lost touch. He asked Laura for \$300 to buy a coat for his girlfriend Meka. She gave him \$200 and loaned him the other \$100. After that time, she didn't hear from Maurice for a few years. Maurice had a son with Meka named Maurice Jr. but later Maurice got married to another girl named Michelle and they also had a son. We find out in the book that Maurice actually used the money to buy his sons winter coats. When they lost contact Laura was very concerned and he didn't call her for Christmas or her birthday. She called all the Mazyck's in the phonebook, but Maurice did not have a phone and she had no luck finding him. In 1997 *Good Housekeeping* published an article about her and Maurice, but they still didn't have contact. Oprah found out about the story and contacted Laura. When they invited them both to come to the show, Laura told them that she didn't know where he was. Oprah's people

tried to find him, but even they couldn't succeed. One day 3 1/2 years later Maurice called Laura at her office, and after all those years they reconnected.

In my interview with Ms. Schroff, I asked her what she learned from Maurice about life. Ms. Schroff replied that the first thing she learned from Maurice was about lunch in a paper bag. She said that it never would have dawned on her that something so simple could mean so much. Maurice also helped Laura appreciate her childhood because even though it could be rough she never worried about where her next meal would come from.

A story that Ms. Schroff told me was how the book got its name. She told me that one day she was rushing to her friend's birthday party and didn't have time to go to the card shop. She went to the local Duane Reade and saw a card that said on the front, "There's an old saying about how an invisible thread connects those that are destined to meet," and on the inside of the card it said, "and I'm so happy you are in my life, and happy birthday." She bought the card and called the co-author Alex and they googled the saying to find it was a Chinese proverb that says, "An invisible thread connects those who are destined to meet, regardless of time, place, and circumstance. The thread may stretch or tangle. But it will never break."

In my interview with Ms. Schroff I asked her what she wanted *me* to learn from her acts of kindness. She said that she would like me to learn that one small act of kindness can make a difference and that even inviting a girl I'm not very good friends with to my birthday party so she will be included can have an impact on someone's life.

Tikkun Olam is a Jewish value that means repairing the world. We are taught that we should take action and make the world a better place. I feel that Ms. Schroff's acts were miraculous and showed 'tikkun olam.' In the Talmud there is a saying that says, "And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saves an entire world." Laura's actions repaired Maurice's world, which was filled with bad influences and violence. She gave him hope and taught him a better life. Now as a result of Laura's actions, Maurice's children have a safe home and will not know the suffering and difficult times that their father experienced.