

WORK SAMPLE: PERSONAL ESSAY

Copyright protected

What's So Wrong with the Brady Bunch?

Peter Brady got into serious trouble with Dad's tape recorder. He used it as a remote eavesdropping device, tucked beneath beds and hidden in laundry hampers, capturing closed-door confessions and seizing suburban secrets. But by the end of twenty-two minutes, Peter had learned a lesson in respecting the privacy of others. And, to demonstrate their faith in him, Mr. and Mrs. Brady gifted a grateful and humbled Peter with a tape recorder of his very own.

I was eight years old, watching this particular episode of *The Brady Bunch* from one end of a plush pumpkin-colored sofa, my mother seated on the other. She blew her cigarette smoke abruptly into the air above her head and spat, "Oh, puh-LEEZ! What parent in their right mind would give their kid a tape recorder after he went around the house recording everybody's private conversations? Give me a friggin' break!"

She stood up and left the room in a huff. I heard her squeaky moccasin soles crossing the kitchen linoleum. She would call one of her three older siblings and bitch bitterly about one of her three younger siblings until my stepfather came home from his job search. Then the two of them would go to the golf club for the free buffet, "while our memberships are still good." My younger brother and sister would plead, "But what are we having for dinner?" Inevitably my stepfather would pull a box of Entenmann's doughnuts out of a brown paper bag and toss it onto the counter. "Here."

I remember running after them as they pulled on their jackets and headed for the door. "Mom, Dad, wait. Can I spend the weekend at Elaine Mackey's house? If you drop me off tomorrow morning, Mrs. Mackey says she can bring me home Sunday night."

My mother's expression looked soft enough – or indifferent enough – that I thought she just might agree, but my stepfather intervened.

"Who do you think you're kiddin'?" he barked. "Another weekend at a friend's house?"

He approached me and thrust a thick, square, accusatory finger in my face. "You just want to stay over your friend's houses to get your hands on the free food." He shook his head. "God dammit, this kid is *shrewd*."

Flushed with anger and humiliation, I plodded towards my room, contemplating the meaning of “shrewd”, and feeling the guilty weight of a six-D-battery, Radio Shack tape recorder left running at the bottom of a laundry hamper, even though there wasn’t one.

When I emerged from my room the following morning, I passed my siblings in the hall, the two of them sitting on the carpet in their superhero pajamas.

“Ha, ha. Kim can’t go to her girl-friennnnnd’s,” my brother sing-songed. He passed the back of his hand over his forehead and squeaked, “Please, please let me go! You never let me go anywhere!”

My three-year-old sister giggled and chimed in. “Ohhhh Kim, you’re such a Sarah Burr-hawt.”

My brother shoved her roughly onto her side and made her cry. “That’s not how you say it, stupid. It’s Burr-HART, little miss baby talk!”

On weekday afternoons my mother liked to set up her ironing board in the living room. I sat watching *The Brady Bunch* cross-legged on the floor, perilously close to the T.V. screen inside its dark, hulking, waxy-wood console. From behind me I could hear the occasional sticky hiss of the spray-starch can, the steamy exhale of the iron, and my mother’s voice, punctuating the plot with her snide remarks. “Oh, come ON! What parents sit up in bed at night discussing their kids’ problems like that? This show is *ridiculous*.”

It broke my little heart. Why didn’t my mother like the Bradys, this family I so adored? She seemed to have a particular hatred for Mrs. Brady, which confounded me all the more. After all, they had so much in common. They were both pretty, young-looking mothers with blond hair and blue eyes; Mrs. Brady’s first name was Carol, and that was my mother’s middle name; and “Hey,” I realized aloud. “Mom, you and Mrs. Brady have both been married before!”

“Shhhhh!” my mother’s head snapped up in a panic. “Don’t let your brother and sister hear you say that!”

I was confused. I needed to know why.

“Because they don’t know I was married before. You’re old enough to remember your aunts and uncles talking about it, but the younger ones never have to know. Besides, it was a long time ago. I was very young. Don’t ever say a word about it again!”

Now it's true that once Mike and Carol Brady left their wedding behind them, they never again spoke of their former spouses, ever. But I couldn't recall Mrs. Brady hushing up her former marriage in such a wild-eyed panic.

For a time, my mother's annoyance with The Bradys did rub off on me. I was at an age when I still viewed my mother as wise and all-knowing, intimidating in stature and awesome in age. I was wondrously impressed that she'd been alive to witness the introduction of television *itself!* And I wanted this superhuman figure to approve of me, like me, even love me -- so I emulated her. My face contorted with disbelief when Peter defended Cindy's lisp before the relentlessly teasing Buddy Hinton. After all, the scenario was so *unrealistic*. My mother thought it ludicrous when the Brady kids banded together to win a talent contest; we both clucked our tongues in irritation when they united to scare away a potential buyer for the Brady house. I snorted at the absurdity of Marcia's bulbous, swollen "football nose" and Peter's bookish "twin" Arthur. I grew annoyed with all those gingerly knocks on Dad's study door. After all, how many Dads had a *study*, anyway?

My revulsion wasn't true enough and the hatred didn't last. Deep down, I wanted to be a Brady. I wanted siblings who, for as much as they relished teasing me, would stand by me when the going got tough. I wanted parents who took an active part in my welfare. I wanted to know I could go to my parents when I was troubled -- with the timid, respectful poking of my head into their bedroom and a soft "Mom? Dad?" -- and not only get their undivided attention, but some tender background music, too.

My mother was ironing my stepfather's interview shirts -- perpetually behind an ironing board in my memories of childhood -- while I watched the Brady kids each take responsibility for breaking Mom's favorite vase. They were trying to protect Peter from getting grounded so his weekend camping trip could go off without a hitch. Suspecting Peter's true guilt, his parents put him in charge of doling out punishments for his siblings who'd "confessed". Mr. and Mrs. Brady were gratified but unsurprised when Peter's conscience won out and he admitted he broke the vase.

Suddenly my mother stopped ironing and lit a cigarette. Shaking out the flame of her match, she enlightened me -- informing me carefully, succinctly, and in no uncertain terms, that "Real families don't act that way."

I turned and looked over my shoulder.

"You mean, *our* family doesn't act that way."

My mother's eyes glossed over with a disconcerting vacancy. No, my parents did *not* furrow their brows over coffee, brainstorming together to end nightmares and calm neuroses. I have a therapist now who gets paid to do that.

These days, I can't pass up a lucky stumble onto a Brady rerun. There's something about those familiar segue melodies, and the shallow rattle of the flimsy Danish-modern front door slamming behind a briefcase-bearing Mike Brady, that feels like home to me. Funny, I never saw a box of Entenmann's doughnuts under Mike's arm, although he did occasionally come home bearing tickets to Hawaii. Maybe I'm sensing my mother's voice -- bitter and critical, weaving itself between the oft-repeated lines and haunting the well-known plots -- mocking a sense of home.

The Bradys obviously irked my mom, and I'm sure she resented my devotion to them. I can imagine Carol Brady cocking her head understandingly to one side, pleading to my mother from beyond the blue glow of the television: "*Please don't hate us because we're functional.*"

It's true that no family can be *Brady Bunch*-perfect, and real-life problems are not solved in tidy half-hour episodes. And sure, I acknowledge that *The Brady Bunch* was occasionally far-fetched and silly. Even Robert Reed, who played the Brady patriarch, was known to object so emphatically to the absurdity of certain episodes that he'd allegedly stalk off the set. But was the show all that worthy of my mother's ire? What's so terrible about *The Brady Bunch*? More specifically, what's wrong with being happy and well-adjusted? Does the fact that the Bradys were a carefully scripted, make-believe family necessarily mean they had it wrong?

I have to wonder if society scoffs at the ideal of the Bradys because collectively, we're so accepting of dysfunction in the home. Some of us were taught that a harmonious nuclear family is a fairy tale. I think that's a tragically sad and cynical point of view.

Can negative ninnies like my mother, who raise their families in dark, sneering realms of impossibility, be taught to embrace the possible? I was made to feel naïve and foolhardy for believing in *The Brady Bunch*. But when I look at the abundant flow of love and respect in my adult life, I know I'm no fool. A healthy dose of self-generated idealism has served me well. I refuse to accept that contentment has necessary limits. I refuse to foster chaos under my own roof. I reject the yammering of miserable people who criticize healthier examples of living -- whether real, or as imagined by Sherwood Schwartz.

Maybe they should look to Molly Weber, the quiet, mousy classmate Marcia Brady took under her wing. Molly didn't believe in anything more for herself than a drab and dateless life, but Marcia showered Molly in that endless Brady optimism. And Marcia

Kim Brittingham
Content Development • Social Media
hello@kimwrites.com
212.729.4370

didn't mislead Molly – oh, no. Molly learned that her life could be just as charmed as a Brady's, but she would have to do the work. Molly willingly went through the rigors of balancing books on her head, snagging her hair on curlers and hiking her skirts above the knee. She came to believe in a unique set of possibilities for herself and worked towards them. Before the semester drew to a close, Molly had become a hot ticket -- a '70s teen dream.

Regardless of its glossy television veneer, Molly's story holds a universal truth. If we all believed in better lives for ourselves and took the appropriate action, every last one of us could go to the senior banquet on an astronaut's arm.