

## Warren Binford: How to win a ribbon for Worst Mother

Written by Warren Binford Commentary

Oct. 06

statesmanjournal.com

We mothers are a universally imperfect lot.

Most of us strive to be the best mothers we can and some of the more competitive among us secretly strive to win a “Mother of the Year” award, at least from our own children. But the truth is (as both our children and husbands know only too well) many of us frequently disappoint our judges. Indeed, some of us occasionally behave in such a way that qualifies us for a nomination as “Worst Mother of the Year,” and a few of us even demonstrate that behavior publicly. Gasp!

Take last Thursday.

One of our family’s favorite local traditions is the cross-country races in Bush’s Pasture Park every Thursday evening in August. We discovered this delightful, family friendly athletic event seven years ago when our oldest daughter was 3 years old. Dozens of little children would line up to race 500 meters, while parents watched and cheered and supported their young sons and daughters learning to run competitively.

The chaos of 2-, 3- and 4-year-olds zigzagging back and forth and bumping into each other at the start of the race is simply precious to watch, as is watching little people less than three feet tall crossing the finish line exhausted and bewildered five to 10 minutes later. After all, it is not easy for wee legs to run 500 meters.

The race organizers would award all children who ran in the race a ribbon either for participating, finishing or placing, depending on their level of achievement. Our oldest daughter participated for years and won all levels of ribbons, which she continues to cherish and proudly display on her bedroom walls. Thus, it is no surprise that her little sister has been waiting to win one of these ribbons her whole life.

Thursday night was our 3-year-old’s big day and she knew it. She grew angry at me in the morning for going to work on her race day and started calling me at the office at 3 p.m. to urge me to come home so that she would not miss her 6:20 p.m. race. She was so excited to run in the race so that she could finally win a ribbon like her sister!

Well, the race began and less than 100 meters into it, our daughter fell apart. She started crying and screaming and complaining that her legs hurt. I took her by the hand and ran with her reminding her that if she wanted to win a ribbon, she just needed to finish.

I basically spent five minutes of my life dragging a little 3-year-old girl crying and screaming for 400 meters. (Yes, I was one of THOSE moms.) Worse yet, as we came around the final turn, there was one of my colleagues watching disapprovingly of my vulgar display of poor mothering.

When we finally crossed the finish line, no one gave our daughter a ribbon. I quickly asked an organizer and she explained that they no longer award ribbons for finishing. Even 3-year-olds have to place in the top five for their category to receive a ribbon.

I could hardly breathe as we waited another 45 minutes to learn that our daughter placed fourth for 3-year-old girls, but her age category included 4-year-olds and so she did not receive a ribbon.

My mind quickly raced with options. On the one hand, I understood the organizers' decision only to award ribbons to the highest performers. On the other hand, I resented them changing their rules mid-siblings.

Moreover, this is America where we are all winners (or so we are told) and we are encouraged to raise our children with an inflated sense of self-esteem. How was I supposed to raise my daughters as normal Americans unless event organizers recognized them as winners even when they were not?

More important, how am I supposed to win a "Mother of the Year Award" even when I am not?

As we left the races carrying our tired daughter on my hip, she asked me, "Mama, why didn't they give me a ribbon?"

Loathe to tell her it was because she had lost, and wanting to keep my promise that she would get a ribbon if she finished the race, I stopped by the party store and let her pick out the ribbon of her choice. That is why our 3-year-old went to sleep Thursday night wearing a pink satin ribbon that said, "Mom to Be."

Let's just hope that when that day comes, she will be a better mom than her own.

Warren Binford is an associate professor and director of the clinical law program at Willamette University College of Law. She lives in Salem with her husband and their two daughters. She can be contacted at [wbinford@willamette.edu](mailto:wbinford@willamette.edu).