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A dad reveals:

My life as a science fair project - An experiment measuring how cuts heal means someone has to get cut. A father rises to the occasion.

By Neil Reisner

I am a science fair project.

Mind you, this was never my career goal. When I was a boy and someone asked me what I wanted to be, I'm pretty sure I never said: "A science fair project."

But a project I am, a volunteer subject for my children's forays into the sciences, willing to give blood (literally), sweat and tears to help them learn and also to compete against other parents ... I mean classmates.

I didn't know about science fairs until the day I found a flier in Jolie's backpack headlined "Science Fair ." It said science fairs enhance children's critical thinking skills by teaching them to test theories using the scientific method.

I soon learned what science fairs really are: A tool of the Devil to test how well parents can motivate children, do research and experiments and — the night before it's due — assemble a three-panel cardboard display of the results, all while preparing dinner, giving baths and putting other children to bed.

The first one wasn't so bad.

Jolie decided to see whether Sea-Monkeys could learn.

Perhaps you remember "The Amazing Live Sea-Monkeys," super-sized brine shrimp advertised as "a true miracle of life" whose dried eggs are sold to children who raise them in tiny plastic tanks and solemnly bury them in the backyard after their inevitable deaths. Jolie wanted to know whether the rehydrated creatures could "learn" to respond to taps on their tank in a manner reminiscent of Pavlov and his salivating dogs.

The Sea-Monkeys died in an unexpected cold snap, save one very large and apparently very happy creature that did indeed respond to Jolie's taps. She wrote down her theory, hypothesis and method, took notes, researched brine shrimp, created the display all by her 8-year-old self (That's our story and we're sticking to it!) and brought it to the Jewish day school she attended. The project took first place in Jolie's third-grade class, went on to the regional competition and tied for third place in her age group.

The next year followed suit. I had recently been diagnosed with diabetes, and Jolie found my several-times-daily blood sugar testing routine fascinating — a quick finger poke, a drop of blood and the meter that measures its sugar content.

When the science fair note came home, she thought it would be cool to see how various foods influenced blood sugar in a diabetic (me) and a person without diabetes (her).

For a week we ate the same foods — bananas, broccoli, chicken, Coca-Cola and the like — poking our fingers before and after to see the difference. This time we knew the drill: hypothesis, method, notes, research, results and the night-before-it's-due rush for her to build the display all by herself. (That's our story and we're sticking to it.) Jolie went to the regional fair again, but didn't win.

The display perhaps looked too perfect, we thought, as if a grown-up had done it.

Past being prologue, I shouldn't have been surprised the next year when Jolie sidled up and announced it was science fair time again.

"What can we do this year, Daddy?" she asked, giving me the dewy-eyed look I know signals trouble.

"What do you have in mind?" I replied.

Jolie had cut herself that day and we veered into a conversation about how wounds heal.

“I know, Daddy!,” she exclaimed. “We can see how cuts heal with different things like Band-Aids, gauze, cream and stuff.”

A science fair project on cuts means someone has to get cut.

“Uh, Jolie, who are you going to cut?”

“You, Daddy.”

So, a couple of weeks later I sat shirtless as Jolie swabbed my bicep with alcohol and picked up one of the sterile, very sharp lancets I use for blood-sugar checks. She looked at the lancet, looked at me, looked at the lancet and ran out of the room. “I can’t do it, Daddy.”

Next up, Mom took the lancet and scratched my skin, hard enough, maybe, to sooth a mosquito bite but not hard enough to draw blood. “I can’t do it, Neil.”

It was apparently up to me.

I took the lancet, jabbed it into my bicep, pulled — skin makes an interesting ripping sound when it’s torn — and watched blood flow down my arm.

Then I did it five more times.

We photographed my wounds, applied various nostrums and bandages and took pictures. For a week, Jolie chronicled their healing with notes and pictures while I had fun telling friends about the project, rolling up my sleeves to display my stigmata and waiting for their horrified responses.

As usual, we left the assembly until the night before the project was due. After a cavalcade of mini-crises — research left at school, pictures that didn’t show the cuts and a late-night run to the drug store to develop better photos — Jolie put together the display all by herself. (Yup, that’s our story and we’re sticking to it.)

This time we made sure to mount one picture a little cockeyed so it wouldn’t look too grown-up. She lost five points for the error.

Jolie went to the regionals nevertheless. Her face fell briefly when she wasn’t among the winners, but she perked up as a flock of kids gathered around.

“That was your project?”

“The one with the blood?”

“He did it himself?”

“Ewwwww, gross!”

After we got home, Jolie handed me a note.

“Dear DaDa: I hope your arms don’t hurt too much. You were very brave giving yourself the cuts. Thanks for being my science fair guinea pig.”

Jolie is in high school now, more interested in boys, music and makeup than science fairs, and for several years I’ve gone unpoked and unprodded.

But the day came when her sister Aleeza brought home a flier from fourth grade.

It was science fair time again. But now it’s called an “invention convention” and involves creating an “invention,” some device that in a child’s view will make the world a better place.

For her first go, Aleeza decided to build a magnetic-levitation hover board. For her second, she constructed an auto alarm that administers a shock instead of sounding a siren.

So far, I’ve gotten off easy. The only bodily fluids I’ve donated to Aleeza’s cause were from a cut caused by an errant X-Acto knife.

But I’m worried about next year.