Comic con can bridge a family gap

The day was Aug. 1, 1987. Heat waves wafted off the pavement of Iowa Highway 92 and made the cornfields across the road from our Winterset acreage blurry from a distance.

My dad and I loaded up into his big, brown Ford Country Squire station wagon. Dad was 68 at the time and getting frail. Heart disease was slowly killing him.

I didn’t know that at the time. Or, rather, I refused to believe it.

I was 12 years old and wanted to believe that all stories have happy endings. I ignored the gray tone of his skin, his constant shortness of breath and the way he wore out after walking only a few steps.

I was especially oblivious that Saturday afternoon. I tingled with excitement. We were driving to Johnston, to the headquarters of Iowa Public Television.

The Doctor Who Celebration and Tour visited. It was a convention for fans of the long-running British science fiction series about a time traveler and his friends saving the universe from cardboard and rubber monsters.

“Doctor Who” was my favorite television show and the Doctor, the mysterious traveler who changed his face from time to time, was my favorite hero.

My dad didn’t really understand my obsession with this odd program with dodgy special effects and wobbly sets. But it was on IPTV, so it couldn’t be all bad.

IPTV ran “Doctor Who” episodes Sundays through Fridays at 10:30 p.m. when I was a boy. My dad let me stay up and watch the adventures on the condition I gave him no nonsense when it was time to wake up for school the next morning.

I broke that promise often. Dad mixed a glass of chocolate milk with powdered

See FINNEY, Page 4A
FINNEY
Continued from Page 3A

Nestle’s Quik. I liked that chocolate milk the best because it left big globs of powder at the bottom of the cup that I could scrape out with a spoon when I finished my milk.

To this day, I feel a slight pang of nostalgia whenever I hear a spoon tinkling around the inside of a glass.

I read in the Register that the “Doctor Who” tour was coming to Johnston. I begged my dad to take me.

I had to go. It was, not to overstate it, the most important thing that was likely ever to happen in my life.

My dad grew up an Iowa farm during the Great Depression. He was drafted into the Navy during World War II and loaded ships in Florida.

He was a traveling salesman who negotiated deals on his good word and handshakes.

He was an outdoorsman who loved hunting and fishing.

He rooted for the Iowa Hawkeyes in football and basketball and kept tickets for the whole family at the Drake Relays.

G. Willard Finney was not one for flights of fancy, unlike his youngest son.

I never cared for the outdoors.

I liked comic books and stories where things blew up and the good guys won.

I found John Wayne Westerns boring, even if he was Winterset’s favorite son. Where were the lightsabers and spaceships? Yawn.

Still, my sickly dad from a different time drove me up to see this spectacle. It consisted of a semi-trailer filled with costumes, set pieces and sound effects from the series.

A classic car used in the show was there, too, along with K-9, the Doctor’s robot dog.

My dad had passing familiarity with K-9. I made my own out of cardboard and tinfoil. Sometimes K-9 would get damaged in one of our adventures, which required him to be “repaired” with fresh foil. Dad was unamused by this need to constantly restock aluminum foil.

Dad struggled that hot August day. I saw him fish out his nitroglycerin pills once or twice.

I winced at that. I knew he was suffering so I could have all this fun.

We didn’t have very much money. A couple years earlier, Dad bought a big acreage in Winterset where he grew up and where he wanted me to grow up.

But the house had a lot of problems, and Reagan-era interest rates were in play, so we were broke. Still, Dad bought me a big hardback picture book.

We sat in IPTV’s auditorium as Janet Fielding, one of the actresses on the series, talked about her role. She mentioned one show where London policemen had been taken over and turned into scary monsters. She said the authorities grumbled about this.

This amazing thing happened. My dad leaned over and whispered to me, “That’s true. They take their police seriously over there.”

What was this? My dad was paying attention to these stories about time travelers. How could this be? I always thought my dad didn’t understand me.

But there he was at a “Doctor Who” convention, paying attention and talking to me about it. I could have floated away.

We ate cheeseburgers at Burger King and drove home. Mom, who didn’t go with us, asked us how it was. Again I was shocked, as Dad did most of the talking.

He told Mom about the car, the trailer, the actress and the robot dog. And another amazing thing happened.

Dad said to Mom that my homemade version of the robot dog was “pretty darned close to the real thing.”

All this time, I thought my dad wanted me to be more like my older brothers, who were athletes, hunters and Boy Scouts.

But in that moment, I knew my dad accepted me for who I was, as I was. I understood just how much he really loved me that day.

Dad died in December the next year. That day at the “Doctor Who” convention is one of my fondest memories of our time together.

Some 20,000 people are expected to visit the Wizard World Comic Con at the Iowa Events Center over three days this weekend.

Many parents are certain to be there with their children. I hope they take the time to enjoy this adventure with their children because, not to overstate it, it is the most important thing ever to happen in their lives.

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