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**NOTEBOOK**

**The Poncho Bearer**

**By** [**JOHN SCHWARTZ**](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/s/john_schwartz/index.html?inline=nyt-per)

SAM wears a Mexican poncho to school every Friday.

Like a number of things about our middle child, the “why” of it is a mystery. When he started wearing it about two years ago, I guessed that he was perhaps reinterpreting the idea of casual Friday for high school. Or he might have just thought, “I will wear the poncho to school on Friday. See what happens.”

“Thought” may be too strong a word. The poncho appeared in our home when a boy gave it to our oldest child, Elizabeth. She had no interest in it, but Sammy did. It is brightly colored, or more accurately, blinding. By all rights, he should look stupid. In a weird way, he looks good.

As we all know, high school for most teenagers is a time of intense pressure to conform. But at 16, Sam has become something of a quiet joker, a subversive with a smile.

Sam has often found ways to stand out in situations where others try to fit in. When we first moved to our little town in New Jersey six years ago, he was entering fifth grade. After watching his new school for a while, he came home one day and told us that there were three kinds of kids: the straight-A kids, the kids who were always in trouble and the class clowns. “I think I have a shot,” he said, “at class clown.”

And so he’s always made his own path. He dyed his dark blond hair Corvette red one year, got a buzz cut the next. Always changing, always distinctive, and always with that knowing smile. Then he donned the poncho. And then again. And again. Before long, he was known more as Poncho than Sam in the halls of his school.

A couple of his coaches didn’t like it; one warned Sam that people would not take him seriously if he continued to wear it. As a compromise during football season, he threw his serape over his jersey, which players are required to wear on game days. Even he seemed to think the combination looked stupid, and ultimately he left the poncho home a couple of days in favor of the team colors.

Sam let us know about the coaches’ displeasure — not because he wanted us to intervene, just F.Y.I.

Now, I am not a parent who’s going to get upset if my son dresses funny. My parents taught me that lesson in the early 1970s in Galveston, Tex., when the principal of Ball High School suspended my brother Dick for having long hair.

My brother thought there was a First Amendment issue at stake, and my dad decided to back him up — literally, to make a federal case of it. Dick and Dad took the school district to court. It was a risky move; my father was a state senator, and it was not a popular stand. People called our home — the number was always listed — and shouted obscenities and hung up.

We lost the case. And I ended up thinking my father was the kind of guy who would stand up for his children no matter what.

So I never gave Sam any trouble about the poncho. For his part, Sam showed his coaches that he was every bit as serious about sports as he was silly in his choice of Friday attire. They’ve seen his determination when he pushes through the offensive line to take down an opposing quarterback. He shows the same drive on the wrestling mat and the lacrosse field.

With achievement came acceptance. The wrestling team gave out knit caps at the end of the season with the player’s name embroidered on the back. Sam’s said “Poncho.” At the end of lacrosse season, one of the coaches gave a speech about all the funny things he had learned that year. The collection of inside jokes had the players rolling, but the best line was the last: “I have learned it’s O.K. to wear a poncho.”

Sammy decided to write an essay for an English class about the poncho. Many mysteries were revealed. He wrote that he started wearing it because, when he tried it on at home, it made him laugh. He also acknowledged that it has become something of an obligation.

“Despite the amount of fun I’ve had with this whole experiment, I do tire of it from time to time. I didn’t know what I was getting myself into at the start, and now it’s escalated to the point where if I stop more than half the school will forget that the weekend is about to come up. I feel obligated. I must fulfill my duty in this strange society of learners to remind them of the good times ahead, even if they only last a few precious days.”

He also included a haiku:

A blur of color

I stride as poncho billows

In the strong wind gusts.

The essay concluded with his plan to pass his poncho along “to a predetermined underclassman who upholds all of the standards necessary to become the next Poncho Bearer” and who will “Remember that the Poncho Bearer does not own the Poncho, but is merely holding onto it and taking care of it for future generations.”

O.K., he seems to have cribbed that from the Patek Philippe ads. But it still brought a lump to my throat. The process of finding yourself only starts in high school; it goes on through the college years.

Defining yourself is the central question of adolescence. We ask, Am I a jock or a geek? A joker or a hippie? Am I smart? Good looking? Am I enough like everyone else? Am I distinctive? We are pulled in every direction. Sam has asked the question and, I think, begun to answer it well.

And so I have felt pretty good about my own light touch as a parent. That good feeling lasted about a week, until I got an instant message from my daughter at college:

I got a tattoo today.

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