

PAUL TEUTUL JR.

with David Thomas



DESIGNING
MY LIFE OF
CHOPPERS,
FAMILY & FAITH

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ONLY

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The BUILD

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The **BUILD**

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CHOPPERS, FAMILY & FAITH**

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THE BUILD

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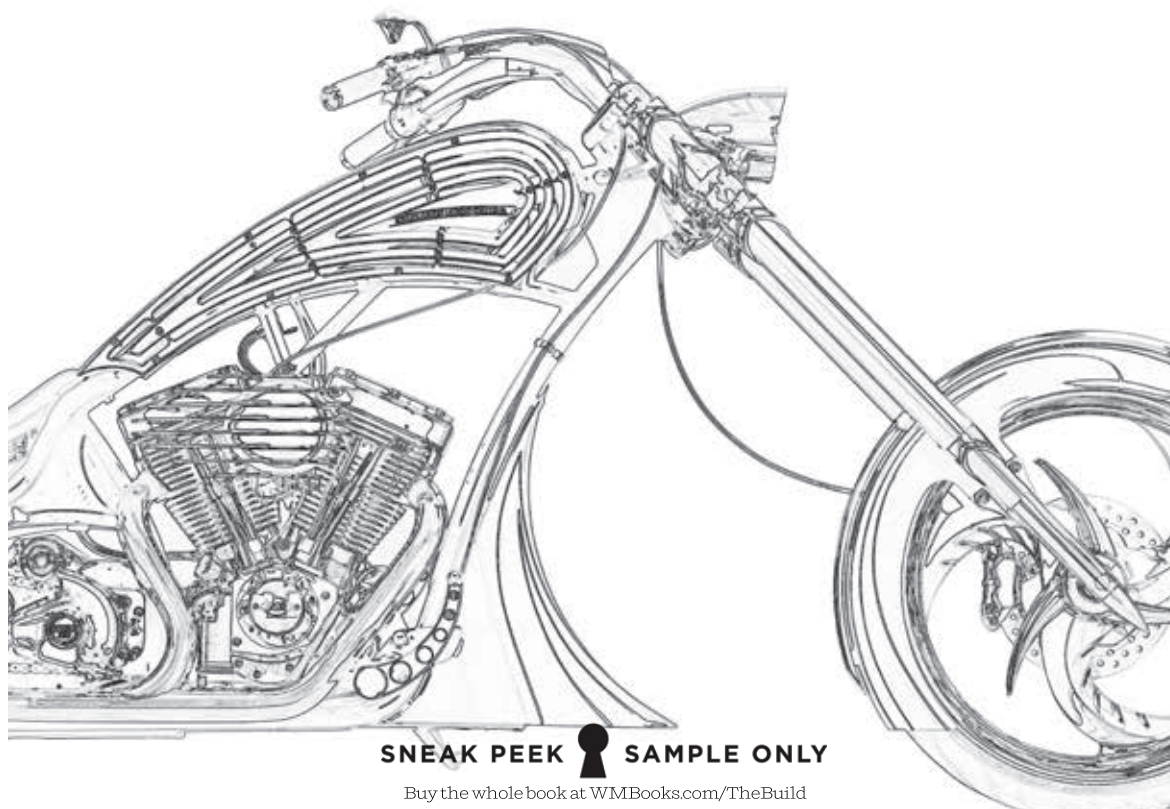
*To my son, Hudson.
May God bless you and keep you, and may all
you do far exceed anything I have ever done.
You are destined for greatness.*

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1

REALITY OR UNREALITY TV?



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It remains humorous to me that after ten years of appearing on a reality television show, the question I am most often asked, by far, is whether what happened on our show was, well, *real*.

But then again, the dynamic that made *American Chopper* a global phenomenon did appear *unreal*, prompting the two to three million viewers tuning in on Monday nights to hope—even pray, for some—that the volatile relationship between my father and me was too bad to be true.

The premise of the show was simple: a father and son work together to build custom motorcycles. *American Chopper* worked because the bikes and our relationship were jaw dropping. For 10 seasons and 233 one-hour episodes, my father and I were often a relational train wreck that proved equally as difficult to turn away from as to watch.

And, yes, it was real. In fact, I believe that because of my relationship with my father, *American Chopper* not only was the most real reality show, but it was the first true reality show that didn't involve surviving on an island.

The arguments, shouting matches, door slamming, and wall punching were no different from my life growing up with my father, working for him

in the steel business, and then building custom bikes together. The only difference once *American Chopper* started was that there were cameras around recording our blowups for the world to see.

I have learned that there are many people with stories similar to mine—people who are part of, or are directly impacted by, an abnormal relationship. I have nodded in understanding while listening to fans of our show describe their relationships gone bad. I have even talked with one man who might have had a worse relationship with his father than I did with mine. I had not imagined that possible.

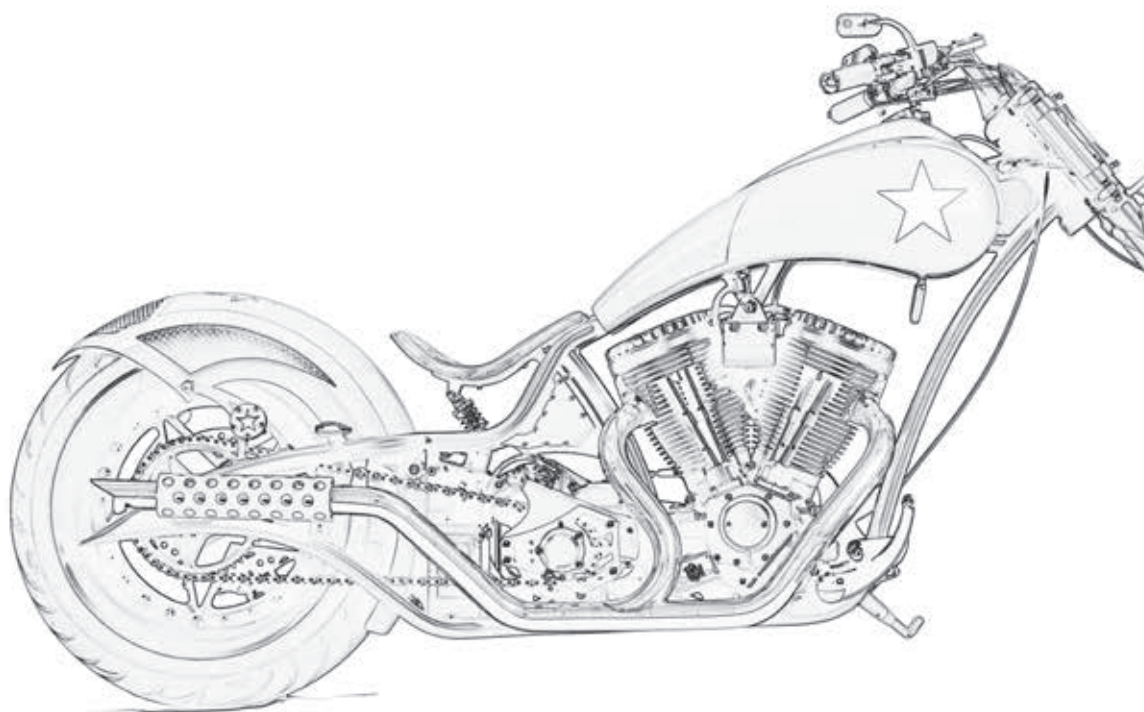
Those conversations are one reason I decided to write this book. I have been married to Rachael for seven years now, and our strong relationship is one my parents did not have. Our son, Hudson, is coming up on three years old, and our father-son dynamic will be the complete opposite of what I grew up with. I have faith that will be the case . . . because of my faith. And when the opportunity arose to write a book about choppers, my family, and my faith, I said, “I’ve got to do this.”

Seeing my relationship with my father play out on a reality show for ten years was difficult because our society tends to keep such problems hidden. It has been difficult to detail in this book my bad experiences with my father because he is my dad, and I love him, and I have long desired to have a normal relationship with him.

But I kept it real on *American Chopper*, and I am keeping it real in this book because I know there are too many others who will nod in understanding as they read my story. Although I have learned that I cannot make my father love me back no matter what I do, God loves me unconditionally, and from the overflow of His love, I can break the generational curse that has marred the Teutul family.

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MEET THE FAMILY, THE WHOLE FAMILY



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I am not great with dates, but I'll never forget September 28, 2008. That's the day my father fired me. Getting fired seemed devastating at the time, but it turned out to be one of the best things that could have happened to me.

I was less than a week shy of my thirty-fourth birthday when my father, with cameras rolling, fired me from Orange County Choppers. I had grown up under the same roof as my father. I had worked for him for ten years in the steel business. We had built bikes together for almost another decade, with the previous six years marked by the celebrity and contention that came from filming *American Chopper* in our upstate New York shop.

The day he fired me began a process that allowed me to come out from under the oppressive environment I had always known; I matured mentally and spiritually and flourished creatively. Until then, I had not realized how negative the dynamic with my father was, or how much and for how long he had attempted to control me. We had spent every day together, at work and outside work. It was like an unhealthy marriage.

My father had separated from my mom in 1997, after twenty-five years of marriage and four kids. But until I got fired, there was no separation from my father. I had never imagined how much good could come from something that, at the time, hurt so bad.

I'm forty-two as I write this book, and all my life I have wanted more from my relationship with my father. But I just don't know if he is capable of giving more. My father is a product of his upbringing. We all are, I suppose, somewhat by nature and the rest by choice.

My parents had been separated for five years when we filmed the pilot for *American Chopper*, so little is known about my mom publicly. But with my father, it takes only one episode, if that much, to peg him for what he is: loud, strong willed, highly opinionated, and very much "my way or the highway."

I have a lot of compassion for my father because he did not grow up with good role models. His parents argued constantly in their home, and he had a horrible relationship with his mother. He's told me how he did not like his mother, a heavy drinker, because of how bad she treated his father in public. As a result, he did not have a nurturing relationship with her.

My father had an alcoholic mother, and I had an alcoholic father. I've thought a lot about this and talked with friends and relationship experts about it, too, and for me, as a man, there is no question that I would rather have a loving, caring mother and an alcoholic father than the other way around. I feel like it's a game changer when there is strain or an unloving dynamic between a mother and a son, because that son will tend to have pretty big issues when he grows up. That is what I observed with my father.

My father's name is Paul John Teutul, and once our show became a big hit, he started going by "Senior." I'm Paul Michael Teutul. While I'm not technically "Junior," I've been called that since back in the days when I

worked with my father in his steel business. Both of my grandfathers were named Paul, and my mom's name is Paula.

My parents are native New Yorkers: my mom is from Brooklyn, my father from Yonkers. They met during high school in Pearl River, which is on the New York–New Jersey border, twenty miles from midtown Manhattan. I was born in Suffern, New York, in 1974. Shortly after I arrived, my parents and I moved forty miles north to Montgomery, in Orange County, where my father and a friend started an ironworks company. I have lived in Montgomery ever since, and I don't see that ever changing.

My mom tells me I was a happy little kid, well behaved and even tempered—and quite curious. As far back as I can remember, I enjoyed taking things apart to see how they worked and then, for the most part, putting them back together.

The grandparental support every kid needs came from my mother's side of the family. We were together with her parents for all the holidays and much of the time in between.

When I started kindergarten, I hated it. A kid not liking school isn't exactly breaking news, but saying I hated school is not an adequate description. I didn't like riding the bus, either, so I faked being sick to stay home as many times as I could. But the odd thing was that once I made it to school, I would be okay.

I wound up going through kindergarten twice because I was an October baby and my parents held me back so I wouldn't be so young compared to the others in my class.

I struggled to stay focused in class and did not do well academically. I had the ability to apply myself, but didn't. That trait would stick with me for years. Place me in a situation that required mechanical ability or troubleshooting,

though, and I did well because I learned more by hands-on experience than by reading books.

Even as a kid, I was the one in the family who—by choice—put toys together, especially at Christmas. Whenever I read “Assembly required,” I eagerly accepted the challenge. I wouldn’t read the instructions, but I would look at the picture of the finished product and figure out how to put the toy together. There might be an extra washer or two left over when I finished, but the job always got done.

The early years of school were difficult for me because of the instability in our home created by my father’s alcoholism. I wasn’t old enough then to label that stage of my life, but I was insecure. Kids, earlier than we often realize, have a knack for being able to recognize when relationships are abnormal at home, regardless of whether they can put their finger on the reason or even express it.

I carried a lot of fear, too. I wanted no part of anything that took me out of my comfort zone, including being away from my mom. I think a big reason I didn’t want to go to school was I must have been afraid that I would come home and my mom wouldn’t be there.

When I was in third or fourth grade, I went to a weeklong Cub Scouts camp. I was so excited to go on the trip, but the instant my parents drove away, a debilitating fear overwhelmed me. I was not allowed to call home, which made matters worse. I was so afraid that I slept every night in the same sleeping bag as my best friend. When my parents picked me up at the end of camp, my mother noted that I had worn the same clothes all week. Being away from home caused more fear than I could manage.

Montgomery, at the time a town of about sixteen thousand, presented an intriguing dichotomy. Aside from all the dysfunction at home, my childhood had an all-American feel to it.

I have three siblings: brothers Daniel (Danny) and Michael (Mikey), who are two and four years younger than me, respectively; and my sister, Cristin, who was born when I was eight.

Our family lived on a small block with perhaps a dozen houses, and in our neighborhood there were plenty of kids the same ages as my brothers and me. We played a lot of backyard football growing up, with each of us wearing our favorite team's helmet. I proudly wore the blue helmet of my beloved New York Giants.

We also played in a cornfield at the end of the street, and there was a nearby pond where we would go bass fishing. We spent hours walking up and down railroad tracks—which I now recommend kids *not* do—and killing bees in the railroad ties. We rode bicycles on trails through the woods and built tree forts and ground forts; we flew kites on fishing poles as high in the sky as we could get them. An occasional fight would break out, and the football games grew a little rough at times, but overall, we had tons of fun in the stereotypical apple-pie setting where kids could roam carefree.

It was odd how miserable it could be inside our home, and then we would go down the street to play and life could not be any better.

MY FATHER: WORKING AND DRINKING

My father was a workaholic and an alcoholic. Actually, I would say he was a raging alcoholic. Because he was self-employed, he would work and drink all day, then drink liquor all night. He would come home for dinner, and if he didn't like my mom's meal, he'd swipe the meal off the table or smash his plate on the floor. Come to find out later, my father's dad had been a great cook and would use meals as compensation for weaknesses in his relationship with my father. My mom, however, wasn't a great cook, although being

Italian, she did have her signature dishes, like Swedish meatballs, meatloaf, and the most delicious sauce anyone could hope to taste.

Things tended to go haywire most often at dinnertime. My father's violent reactions at the dinner table were always accompanied by his yelling at Mom. After he'd throw his fit, he would go out drinking. On the occasional nights when he stayed home, he would pass out drunk on the couch.

My father worked hard to make money for his family and drank just as hard. My mother complained about how much he drank, so they constantly argued. I didn't want to take sides. When parents fight, who is supposed to be the judge and the jury? Even though I felt like my father was bullying my mom, I was a kid, and I couldn't make the decision of who was right and who was wrong. I don't think a kid *should* have to make that determination. So I learned at an early age to manage being in the middle between the two sides.

I didn't know then that parents yelling at each other was not normal; I had no barometer to go by. When I was at a friend's house and his parents had a loud discussion or maybe even an argument, the intensity was nothing compared to what I heard at home. But only in retrospect could I describe our home environment as dysfunctional, as anything other than just the way life happens. Parents screaming at each other is disturbing to a developing mind, emotionally and otherwise. My fears came from feeling that instability at home.

Our family desperately needed help, and we attended counseling sessions for what seemed like forever. For me, counseling was kind of a mixed bag. We met with numerous counselors, and I noticed that they sometimes seemed to have their own dog in our fight. It wasn't that counselors took sides, but in some cases it seemed that their personal experiences affected how they gave counsel. The most productive part for me was that early on

the counseling helped me identify struggles I faced—such as anger—and that abandonment issues and broken promises were the sources of those struggles.

One thing I credit my father for is that although he was physically abused as a child, he drew a line and committed to never physically abusing his children. The most contact he would make with us when we acted up would be a smack on the butt, the legs, or the arms. But never in the head or our faces. As far as I know, he never physically abused my mother, either.

That being said, he did verbally and emotionally abuse us.

The instability he created at home essentially was abusive, because as our father he was responsible for us. Any parent who does not provide a child with the stable home he deserves is stealing from that child. It doesn't matter whether it's intentional or unintentional.

My father also had a bad habit of failing to keep his promises to me. He would commit to take me fishing, for example, but more often than not, we wound up not going because he was working or drinking, or both.

My earliest memories of connecting with my father involved, of all things, motorcycles. My father always had bikes around, and he owned a 1974 Harley-Davidson Shovelhead that he had customized in our basement. Most of what I remember as quality father-son time came in the basement while he worked on that Shovelhead. I don't know if I actually helped him with his bike, but at least I was there with him.

We also would go on occasional rides around town. My father would put an old seventies helmet on me, and off we'd go. It was probably dangerous for me to be riding with him in my earliest years, but I liked it.

We also rode snowmobiles a lot. I might even have driven a snowmobile before I rode a bicycle. When we took our snowmobiles out, things would

start great, but as the night went on, my father would get drunker and my brothers and I would have to figure out how to get back home. One of his employees would bring us home sometimes, but there were nights when his employees weren't in the best shape to drive us home, either.

I respect how my father, even though he had a serious alcohol problem, was able to persevere despite whatever he was going through. He worked, and he provided for us. I admire the drive he demonstrated. But when I look back at those days of growing up, I can't remember a time when we had a good old-fashioned father-son talk or he told me that he loved me. I'm not saying that didn't happen, but there isn't one time that comes to mind.

MOM: STRONG, COMPASSIONATE WOMAN

My mom—wow! What a wonderful, loving woman. She loved us kids, and as a stay-at-home mom, she was always there for us. In some ways, she was like a single mom raising us while my father was emotionally absent during his drinking years.

My father had a big personality—outspoken and boisterous—and was an iron worker in the most stereotypical sense, while Mom was soft spoken and laid back. She was the type of woman who would never divorce her husband. I considered her more conservative than most of my friends' mothers, including not letting us drink sodas. Nowadays, that's common, but back in the eighties, that stood out compared to my friends. We would tell her that our friends' moms let them drink sodas, but she said they weren't good for us, and she didn't give in to our begging.

Mom's personality was marked by compassion and humor, but trust me, she did not hesitate to discipline us. We didn't get away with much around

her, and when we did wrong, consequences followed. But Mom disciplined us the right way, in my opinion, usually sending us to our rooms or grounding us. I consider her style of discipline a loving discipline designed more to correct than punish us.

Mom was strong. She had to be. She gave birth to all four of us kids naturally, with no drugs. Somehow, with four kids, a husband who couldn't hold it together, and operating under almost constant damage control those early years, she maintained a positive attitude.

We had a loving, interactive relationship with Mom because we spent a lot of time with her. She volunteered in our schools and encouraged us academically by taking an enthusiastic role in our homework assignments.

Mom told us all the time that she loved us. The way that my mother loved me was what I loved about her. If anything, she might have smothered us a little bit. She probably covered for my father a little too much, trying to make it appear that our family was not a mess. But who could blame her?

She worried about us kids, and I worried about her. She cried a lot on my shoulders over her arguments with my father. I think without intending to, she put extra pressure on me to take on the role of being the man around the house, even though I was not yet ten years old. I also put similar pressure on myself; as the oldest, I felt a responsibility to my mother because my father was so volatile.

Mom was consistent with us kids. She wasn't perfect, but she was consistent, and what amount of stability we did have at home came from her. She was the glue that held our family together.

The most important thing Mom did was to instill Christian values in our dysfunctional home. We attended a Catholic church—named St. Paul's, interestingly enough—that was more charismatic than the typical Catholic

church in our part of New York. When I was around eight or so, we switched to a nondenominational church that we really liked. My father went with us sometimes, but Mom was a regular attendee, and she made sure we kids were, too.

Mom took part in Bible studies, and she would read Scriptures to us and tell us what was right and teach us about Jesus. She planted seeds that would have a great impact on me years later.

Ultimately, much of where I am today spiritually is the result of my mom's influence in my early life. I have become more compassionate by watching my mother live out her faith. The compassion that she had can come only from a deep faith.

Mom was my rock. She was the person holding down the fort at home when everything got all crazy. I cannot imagine where I would be now if she had not kept our family together.



THE TEUTUL KIDS

My brother Mikey needs no introduction to *American Chopper* viewers (although he might require a little explaining!). Danny appeared in probably only a couple of episodes, and Cristin managed to avoid the cameras altogether.

Danny was level headed and mostly serious as a kid. With him as second oldest, I wouldn't be surprised if he felt like our father didn't do as many activities with him as he did with me.

He's always been the biggest sports fan among the Teutuls, and he played quarterback in football. My memory is horrible when it comes to names and dates, but Danny can rattle them off like nobody's business, including seemingly from every football game he played during high school—and all my games, too.

Danny was focused, unlike me. (I couldn't figure out what I wanted in life until well into my twenties.) As a kid, he saved every penny he made. His determination and drive made him a successful businessman after he bought the steel company from my father. He was more interested in running Orange County Ironworks than being part of *American Chopper*. Danny really made something out of a mess in turning the business into a solid company, taking risks and reaping the fruits of those risks.

Danny is the type of boss that people love to work for because he treats people fairly. Danny saw the adverse effects of how our father ran his business and became the opposite of him. My brother and I have talked numerous times about how we learned how *not* to run a company by watching our father.

Danny's a great father, too; he has managed to walk that fine line of

running a successful business while also spending quality time with his children.

Mikey, with his carefree and loving personality, was like the stereotypical youngest child in many ways even though he wasn't the youngest. If you didn't like Mikey, something was wrong with you. Fans' outpouring of love for him at public events was borderline ridiculous. People had their differing opinions about my father and me, but everybody loved Mikey. At its core, *American Chopper* was a show about my father and me building bikes together, but Mikey's presence gave our show balance. Where stressful relationships are concerned, more people would want to be like Mikey than me. Extraordinarily laid back, Mikey was the comic relief on the show and in the family. He's always possessed the gift of being able to step into the middle of conflict, lighten the mood with a joke, and give both sides the opportunity to go back to their respective corners to cool off before matters escalate.

Being on television adds stress to relationships, and I think mine and Mikey's might have been hurt in some regards by *American Chopper*. While I was praised as the guy creating these amazing bikes, Mikey was the guy who "answered the phones and took out the trash," and fans treated him a little bit goofy because of that. Who wouldn't resent that?

When our show ended, perceptions of Mikey were slow to change—too slow for Mikey. Although his goofy-guy role worked for him as the peace-making cutup, I believe it also bothered him a little because he is an extremely smart and talented guy and that part of him wanted to be taken seriously.

He loves film, and he has made all kinds of crazy films, including reenactments of notable events like Nancy Kerrigan's infamous whack to her knee leading up to the 1994 Winter Olympics. It's hysterical. He is a painter and had his own art gallery for a while. He is also a capable musician.

Mikey is not afraid to try new things. He's that guy who has no problem grabbing a microphone on open-mic night and putting on an improv stand-up routine that has the audience slapping their tables in laughter.

People love Mikey's kindheartedness. He would literally do anything for anyone who needed help. Perhaps that's because he's been the person who needed help. On the show, everyone saw how he went to rehab for his alcohol addiction. Mikey has come out on the other side of his tough times better for the trials he's endured. He's matured a lot. At this stage in Mikey's life, he's in the best place I've ever seen him.

Then there's Cristin, the baby of the family and the only girl. Cristin's awesome. She's funny, too, although a little more serious than Mikey.

My sister was only two when my father sobered up. She didn't know that crazy period in the Teutul household, but my father never knew how to be a father to her. Not even partially. He just couldn't figure out how to have a father-daughter relationship. I guess my father had issues with females, because he had his worst relationship with his mother, and he fought all the time with my mom. And then Cristin came along, and forget about any meaningful relationship with her.

I don't know how she turned out so well as the youngest in our dysfunctional family. With three older brothers—especially the three she got stuck with—she had to be tough growing up. As a result, she can hold her own with anybody.

Cristin has two degrees and is a registered nurse in New York City, and a good one at that. It takes a special person to be a *good* nurse. To me, that's a career that would make you miserable if you are in it just for a paycheck. But Cristin has been caring for others since she was a kid. She used to volunteer at the retirement home, and I remember her spending Thanksgiving and other holidays volunteering there.

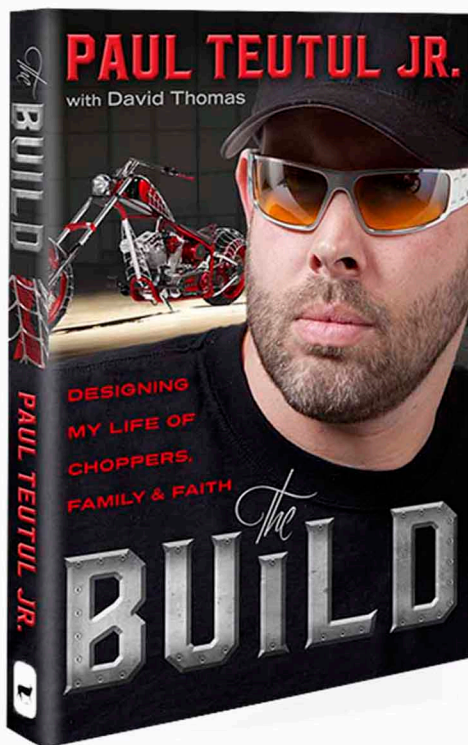
I think Danny, Cristin, and my mother experienced more negative fallout from the show than the rest of our family. The viewers truly knew only my father, Mikey, and me. To viewers, the three of us were the Teutuls, and we represented the entire family to the world. But there were six of us in the family, and it had to be annoying for the others.

The family dynamics on *American Chopper* were new to television, and the ugly shouting matches that happened on our show impacted the family members who had nothing to do with them. They weren't living their lives for the world to see, yet they were having to answer questions because of the other three members of the family. My mother hated all the on-screen fighting in the show's early years. All the dysfunction she'd had to endure privately was now being seen in homes around the world.

The positive impact of our show needed time to surface. Later, my mom worked five years for me answering phones in my new company. When callers learned they were talking to my mother, they were able to share with her some of the good that came from *American Chopper*.

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