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# TONY'S GONE, BUT FAMILIES ARE FOREVER

By ANN ROSEN SPECTOR

WELL, IT'S official. The best show on television ever is over.

But wasn't "Seinfeld" the best show ever? "Cheers"? "All in the Family"? "M\*A\*S\*H"? And before that, weren't there others?

Besides the fact that everything has to be a superlative, why are we so devastated when one of our shows ends? (As if with syndication or "On Demand" it ever does.)

An essence of being human is our need for predictability, stability and consistency. For newborns, it's a survival mechanism: Will I get fed again the next time I'm hungry? Will the people I saw last time show up again? Will this wet feeling ever end?

Prehistoric people had the same need: Will the sun come up again tomorrow? Will we find food again if we hunt or gather?

Our favorite TV shows provide structure in a way that much in contemporary life does not. With "The Sopranos," we knew where we'd be on Sundays at 9. We could TiVO it, but then somehow we'd already know who got whacked. Besides, we didn't want to be the only ones at work or school who didn't know what happened to Tony & Co.

But more important, TV shows give us another family to belong to - watch them change and grow, fight, cheat and lie - and still love each other. That, of course, was David Chase's message all along, including the ending. Whether

we're talking about the family or the Family, it's the ties that bind. Family structures, roles and boundaries can change over time, but families are here to stay.

The *New York Times* claimed that "The Sopranos" was the first family show to demonstrate "the inconsistencies of family life." I disagree.

Every family show does that, including the shows about traditional families ("Donna Reed," "The Wonder Years," "Cosby"), and those that aren't ("Cheers," "M\*A\*S\*H" and "Seinfeld").

Even "Leave It to Beaver" did that. I always thought it was weird that June Cleaver kept house

in a spanking-clean shirtwaist dress, pearls and heels - always smiling and perky.

My mother was also a stay-at-home mom, but she wore what she called a housedress but was really a two-sided apron. A shmata. And while she was a fabulous cook, and dinner was always delicious, there was a constant rumble, sometimes distant like thunder, sometimes like an explosion, about how hard her job was.

Some days she liked being a homemaker, some days she didn't. And it was hard to predict on any given day which it would be.

My mother loved to drive. Not only to go to four different supermarkets to get the perfect foods at the best prices, but to "clear her head." Only later did I realize she was running away. Yes, she came back, but when things got too close, she'd go for a drive again. A lot less content than the TV moms.

The TV dads had their own ways, too. What exactly did Ward do all day? Why didn't he ever come home late? Or cranky?

MY FATHER surely did. Some days he came home eager to play with the four children he hadn't seen all day.

But there were many days when I could tell he wished the house were quieter, the bills lower, and not so many people depending on him. I remember him coming in the door on Fridays (payday for him, allowance day for us) singing, "Oh, I wish I were single again, again, my pockets would jingle again, again."

I'm sure he liked golf as much for the time away from us as for the joy of hitting and searching for that little white ball.

Sure, we had a lot of fun as a family: picnics, the zoo, watching "Car 54" or "The Ed Sullivan Show." But we had problems, too, ones that weren't solved in 22 minutes of air time.

The same is true for my own family. When we're "cooking with gas," we love being with one another. But four strong-willed, verbal adults aren't always in sync.

Family life is inconsistent. In fact, that's the real consistency. There will be life after "The Sopranos," just like there was before it.

We just have to keep the faith. \*

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