

Dear Merilee
 Well you have got the big bit
 you, I guess when you get
 already be past. I can't be
 16 years old. It seems
 years ago when you us
 red cowboy hat + pray
 only 3/5 or so, but
 Stay sweet + pure
 one know that the cl
 you TF

ELDER GARY STEVE



actions speak louder
 + you do fit your name
 of Honor: HAPPY

Love ya
 Always

Two others
 Gary

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LETTER

from a Loving Brother

My older brother missed my 16th birthday because he was serving a mission. Yet the advice he sent me was a present I would cherish forever.

By Merilee S. B. Averett

as told to Richard M. Romney

Sixteen! What a time of life! “Nobody should have to go through this alone,” I thought.

My wise parents were kind and always gave me good counsel. My older sister had just gotten married and moved out of state. My little brother was involved with his 11-year-old concerns. I had great friends, and I knew my Church leaders sincerely cared about me.

But my older brother, Gary, was my confidant. I looked up to him in all things as a teenager. “Whenever I talk to him, things make more sense,” I said to myself. “I wish he could be here right now.”

But he wasn’t. He was far away in Japan, serving a full-time mission.

Despite missing Gary, I did have a fun birthday. My mom made me our traditional birthday breakfast, and I received a few gifts before going to school. That night, my family and I went out for a pizza dinner and ended with birthday cake. I even let myself daydream about dating, driving, and other exciting things I would do as a 16-year-old.

However, the best present I received that day was a letter in the mail. Gary hadn’t forgotten my super special day! This was before the days of email, so a letter took a long time to travel from Japan to Cache Valley, Utah, USA. I was amazed that his letter arrived right on my birthday! The letter was handwritten, which made it more like having my brother present with me as I read:

“Dear Merilee:

“Well, you have got the big birthday coming up, don’t

you? I guess when you get this letter it will already be past. I can’t believe it—you are 16 years old. It seems like only a few years ago when you used to [wear your little red cowboy hat].

“Stay sweet and pure, and always let everyone know that the Church means a lot to you. If you do that, you won’t ever get into a situation where you have to make a decision with all the peer pressure weighing on you. Example: In high school, everyone knew that I didn’t want to drink or smoke, not at all, so I never got invited to a party where that sort of thing went on. My friends knew I didn’t do that. . . .

“If you let people know your standards, then people with your standards are attracted to you. I don’t mean you have to *tell* everyone, but actions speak loud. Your spirit is really sweet, and you do fit your name. And you have a good sense of humor. Happy ‘Sweet 16’ Birthday!” The last sentence was underlined in red. No other birthday present could’ve been better! I read it over and over again, until he was back home from Japan and we could finally talk to each other face to face.

It has been years since I received that letter, but I still have it. Many things have changed since then, but not my love for my brother. Today I sustain him not only as my brother and friend, but as Elder Gary E. Stevenson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The counsel he offers as a special witness of Christ to all the world is an added strength in my life, just like the letter he sent me on my 16th birthday. ■

The author lives in Utah, USA.