

On Being the Granddaughter of a History Fanatic

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PROSE, HONORABLE MENTION (Grades 10-12)

One out of three hundred. When 299 armed soldiers deployed for Korea, my grandfather, whom I lovingly refer to as Zaida, defied the odds. He was chosen to serve as a legal clerk in a court martial unit in the United States. I have heard him nostalgically recount his time in the army since I was in elementary school, and his stories continue to captivate me. What is black and white in a textbook becomes a colorful, three-dimensional narration of his real-life experiences. My 86 year-old, smiling Zaida—a Harvard alumnus, retired American history teacher, high school principal, and university professor—is a history fanatic.

He tells me many tales. Tales of his decades as an educator, of his travels around the world, and countless anecdotes filled with minute details from the lives of Civil War generals to Nixon and Watergate. Not only is he a virtual library of historical knowledge, he has personally experienced landmark events. With him I traveled through a time machine to the Great Depression, the 1960's sit-ins, the Sudanese famine. I lived in Japan, Singapore, Greece, Finland. I met Martin Luther King, Jr., and vicariously listened to his sermon about Rip Van Winkle sleeping through the American Revolution, warning his audience not to sleep through the Civil Rights movement. Through his stories, I imagined the lives of our ancestors who fled from Europe to America before World War I or, worse, perished in the Holocaust.

My grandfather's captivating stories ignite my passion for history by instilling in me the importance of illuminating the past to understand the present and help to predict our future. When I am performing onstage, this has a particular relevance. Understanding the historical context of a composer's or character's life allows me to perform a role with more integrity.

Zaida stresses curiosity is a cornerstone of learning. He is curious about *everyone* and *everything*. I assume that is where my own curiosity "gene" comes from. Years back, my inquisitiveness drove me to ask so many questions that I occasionally would be restricted to a five-question-per-hour limit. But that never stopped me.

I observe my Zaida playing twenty questions with everyone he meets. Those who stray within a ten-foot radius fall prey to his game. In a friendly, sincere way he interrogates the middle-aged woman seated next to him on the bus, the older gentleman driving the bus, waitresses, barbers, flight attendants, taxi drivers. But not simple, polite questions: *How are you? How do you like this beautiful*

weather? Oh, no. He gets personal: What neighborhood did you grow up in? When did your family immigrate to America? From where?

I observe him interviewing complete strangers, in a non-threatening way, with intimate questions one might ask on a date. Questions we *should* be asking each other—questions to discover each other’s stories, to view life from diverse perspectives, to better understand our complex world. My Zaida’s genuine interest and empathy for other human beings is how I model my life.

Once during an overnight layover in Washington, D.C., my mother scored us a hotel shuttle driver who took us on a private midnight tour of the famous monuments. My Zaida delighted in this educational opportunity with his grandchildren, but in between stops, he sat in the front seat, inquiring about the driver’s childhood and history. I knew that brought him as much pleasure as seeing his family soak up the historical sights on this unexpected, magical night. And part of the magic was seeing my grandfather laughing up front with the driver.

Like my Zaida, I too am a history fanatic. I crave to understand how people who came before me lived, saw the world, faced and broke through barriers, and how their lives were at once vastly different from mine yet remarkably similar. This passion grew dramatically when I took Advanced Placement United States History with an outstanding teacher. Throughout that year, my grandfather was an encyclopedia at my side, there to discover, discuss, and debate all aspects of the course. I loved every minute of it.

As I sit on my grandparents’ porch beside my Zaida, I envision him in the 1950’s, defying the odds with his military placement. Today I pledge to put into practice the principles I have learned from him as I begin the next chapter of my life in college.

Sara Shiff is a senior at Armstrong High School. She loves singing, theatre, painting, and being outside. She also enjoys leading her school’s Recycling Project and running her art business.