

One crisp spring day, my brother Artic and I stopped by our grandma Margie's house after school to help with some chores. After the slop bucket and trash were taken out, the driftwood chopped, and the dishes sparkling clean, all three of us sat down in her cozy living room. Being our grandma, Gram started offering us snacks and drinks, which we politely declined. We relaxed quietly for a minute until a sudden thoughtful expression appeared on Gram's tan, beautifully aged face. Then she started telling this story:

"Once when I was a little girl, me and my little cousin were at the beach in the summer. All of a sudden, we saw something big out there in the water! It was a whale! But we never seen a whale before, so didn't know what it was. My cousin started crying because she was scared. I was being bossy because I was older. Even though I didn't know what it was, I said, 'Don't cry anymore! Look, it's just a big seal float!' And my cousin stopped crying so much. Then we ran to go tell Grandma, 'We saw a giant seal float in the water out there!' And my grandma started laughing really hard. And she said, 'No, that's called *cik'artuli*. It means 'the one who eats needlefish.'" And we thought it was just a huge seal float!"

My brother and I cracked up and started asking about story details. Gram's outgoing cheerful nature and silly sense of humor made her the life of the party wherever she went. She loved seeing us laugh at her story, and answered all our questions. Then her face got thoughtful again— but this time she was *really* smiling.

"I was the bossy one in my group of friends, and one Sunday we were at church. We were sitting in the pew, all in a row— and I forget what the preacher was talking about! He was saying something about John the Baptist eating the Word of God. I guess I wanted to be like John the Baptist, so I took a bible from the row and tore a page from it into tiny strips of paper. I gave one strip to each of my friends and whispered to them, 'Eat it!' So we ate those pieces of page from the Bible like communion, just because I wanted to be like John the Baptist!"

I laughed so hard at that story, and could just imagine it happening. Though she was in her seventies, Gram still showed the same strong will and adventurous spirit. She was fully capable of hauling drinking water from underground springs, chopping driftwood for her steam bath, and traveling across miles of tundra on a four-wheeler to pick berries.

I knew that my grandma was funny, but had never heard these kinds of childhood stories about her before. They seemed so distant, like they had taken place in an entirely different universe. Yet Gram's face as she gazed at the events unfolding in her mind's eye revealed how real and near they were to her. Gram was a skilled seamstress with needle and thread, but in that living room she stitched together our two very different worlds with her words. By sharing these and many other memories, she helped us understand who she was, her culture— as well as where we came from.

As a Cup'ig Eskimo high school teacher in rural Alaska, I plan to follow in my grandma's footsteps. I hope to help bridge the gaps between youth, their culture, and the seemingly-distant future. Weaving together a rich cultural heritage and its values with modern-day teaching will create confident students prepared for success after high school. With her stories, Gram taught me invaluable lessons that will continue to guide me no matter what the future holds.