

Memories Are Everything

By Teslin River Brannan

I am the youngest of three and grew up along the meandering banks of the Tanana River in Salcha, Alaska. My parents built a log cabin amidst a rugged landscape flanked by towering spruce trees overlooking the Alaska Range. It is only a short hike through the forest to my grandparents, who lived downriver. Frequently, I ended up at my grandparents, where I raided the cookie jar, listened to their stories, and garnered new skills like using a pocket knife, building a fort, or shooting a bow and arrow. My childhood sounds idealistic - brimming with innocence and youthful exuberance. However, my grandfather passed in 2019, and I found myself thrust into a role that demanded maturity beyond my years.

After Grandpa passed, my grandmother was diagnosed with a progressive neurological disorder called Lewy Body Dementia, which quickly changed our family dynamics. Lewy bodies are protein deposits that develop in nerve cells in the brain. These protein deposits affect brain regions of thinking, memory, and movement. In some cases, Lewy bodies cause hallucinations - both visual and auditory. The impact on my grandma was profound.

Growing up, I knew dementia was a struggle for many people. However, I did not grasp the behind-the-scenes impacts until I experienced it firsthand. With the guidance of doctors, we were able to control many of her hallucinations through medication. Although the new medications worked, they only partially solved the issue, and she moved in with us for closer supervision.

Caring for my grandma is now an integral part of my life, woven into the fabric of our daily existence. My parents retired and could handle most of my grandma's needs, which has made family vacations and logistics complex. Witnessing the gradual decline of my grandmother's faculties was a lesson in resilience and empathy. As her reality changed, she distrusted those around her, and I often found myself accused or criticized. I was at a crucial age of development and started seeing myself through her eyes. I tried my best to please my grandma; therefore, I distanced myself from my peers and buried myself in school and extracurriculars. It seemed nothing I did was enough - eventually, I learned to avoid my grandma whenever possible.

Fortunately, my parents recognized what was happening and arranged counseling. The counselor helped me realize the importance of self-worth and self-esteem. I began to see my grandma in a new light - someone struggling. I began to feel empathetic toward her plight and realized the disease had fundamentally changed her personality. I started to understand that her reality and how she saw me were not mine.

My grandma is no longer critical of those around her - entering a more agreeable stage of the disease. She championed women's rights, settled in Alaska as a P.E. teacher, and earned her pilot's license. She was a world-class athlete, placing 4th in the 1960 Olympic Trials behind the great Wilma Roldoph. Thus, watching her become less of herself each day has been difficult. Soon, she will be entering a memory care facility where the family can visit her often, and she can get the care she needs as things get worse.

I wish there were a happy ending to my grandma's condition, but not all is lost. She is still in there and fighting to keep her dignity. This experience has helped shape me into who I am today. I discovered my self-worth, built my self-esteem earlier than most, and learned not to let the words of others control me. Above all, I have become more considerate, patient, and empathetic to those in need. Some people cannot control their circumstances yet deserve our love and support. Through the lens of adversity, I unearthed depths of emotional maturity I did not know could exist, and I now understand the fragility of life. I will cherish and continue to use these skills as I prepare for college, a career, and a family of my own.