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Personal Writing Sample

Roots Run Deep

The funny part about life is how those with the least are often those who work the hardest and achieve the most. “No one is ever born walking,” as they always say. It takes hard work and it’s often an uphill battle. My grandfather, as cliché as it was, always said to me, “He who gives more when it hurts gets more when it’s over.” He was a man who truly believed that if you were diligent enough in your effort, and had enough heart, then you could achieve anything in life.

I love my whole family, but there’s no doubt that my grandfather single-handedly had the greatest influence on my life. Aldo Herman Mungai was born in Florence, Italy, and became a first-generation immigrant when his parents left the country in 1940; he was ten years old. Growing up here in the States, he primarily lived in West Town, Chicago, a section of the city dominated by European immigrants. His sister and he did not attend elementary or middle school because of the factors that hindered and still hinder immigrants in America: lack of financial resources and a substantial language barrier. At first his father, my great-grandfather, did not have the money to pay for any schooling in Chicago. He came here looking for a job, and when he found one, he soon realized he had to find two more to earn enough for his children’s education. He worked three jobs for almost five years before he could even begin to think about putting one of them into school. Once they started to have the checks add up, it was on to the second step which was teaching my grandfather English. For his first two years in the United States, the only thing he could confidently say was, “Hello, my name’s Aldo.” The sad truth is

that a public education was nothing more than a dream to many immigrants like my grandfather who faced an uphill battle the moment they saw hope and a new life.

Instead of public-school, grandfather was home-schooled by an American neighbor who lived across the street. She taught him the foundations of the English language along with a few standard school subjects like math and reading. Amidst all this work towards getting acclimated to America, he also managed to maintain a job. Having worked as a gas station shelf-stacker from the age of thirteen until the end of high school, he made a dollar-fifty an hour for all five years and he never complained once. My grandfather received the home-schooled education until his father made enough money and decided he was ready for the real deal. He made his American public-school debut as a freshman in high school and went on to graduate with high academic honors. Following high school, my grandfather attended Northwestern University in Chicago, where he then graduated in the top 15% of his class the same and simultaneously met my grandmother. For his profession, he ironically became an English teacher at Lyons Township High School for 36 years; coincidentally the same school I would attend.

Contrasting my grandfather's childhood in every way, shape and form, I grew up as a suburban kid in a town a little over 10 miles outside of Chicago called La Grange. Having a chance to look back on it through my college years living in Colorado, it's a near picturesque suburb. This small dot on the map has roughly 16,000 residents, well over 90 percent of them being white, wealthy and generous taxpayers. La Grange is luxurious, in that it has a downtown area with too many merchandise stores, food places and overall buildings to pay notice. It holds two elementary schools, two public middle schools and two high schools: one public and one private. The only thing they don't have is a zoo.

Now don't get me wrong, I love my hometown of La Grange, but it does nothing except show me how different my background was and is to my grandfathers. Yet, that's where I begin to pause because my grandfather's background is my background. He has done his best to instill every one of his moral values in me, making me feel rooted and grounded as if I am the same hardworking immigrant from Florence, Italy. This stems from more than just him being my grandfather. From an early age, it was apparent to my family that my father—perhaps the single greatest person in my life—had been fighting an alcohol addiction for quite some time. In-and-out of rehab multiple times because of numerous DUIs and job firings, he fought as hard as he could, but I could tell when he wasn't himself. I knew there was some disease within him. My grandfather knew he had to fill-in the gaps that my father was missing, and because of this, I learned the ways of the Italian immigrant. I learned the values of family first, religion, respecting others, responsibility and all things related to integrating into the hardworking American society. Like my grandfather, my father fought his whole life trying to be a better man but, more importantly, trying to better his family. And they both succeeded. Now what kind of a son, or a grandson, would I be if I failed to show that same amount of fight every day? I will always give 110 percent at every task put in front of me because I know that they're both up there, looking down on me with proud hearts and big smiles on their faces.