

Change That Counts

Today in America, women's education is not questioned as something imprudent or extravagant. Women are encouraged to pursue degrees that would allow them to live comfortably and independently. However, the focus of college for women was not always a bachelor's of arts or science, but a MRS. degree. They went to college to find husbands because that was where the potentially successful men were. Then they got married and dropped out to raise a family. History is created by initiators—people who did things differently, changing their lives and the definition of normalcy. My grandma was one of those women. She attended the Stout Institute, now the University of Wisconsin--Stout, to pursue a degree in Home Economics Education. She did not stop when she got married; she went on to receive a master's degree in the same subject while raising three children, keeping house, and usually teaching as well. You may wonder why I am telling you my grandma's story and not my own. The answer is that I am not. The story of my education *is* my story because of my grandma's story. They are united over the distance of half a century, tied together by memories, dedication, hard work, and love. She may or may not have realized it at the time, but she was forging a different story—a story not only for herself, but for the many girls, women, college students, and grandchildren who would share not only her life, but also the path of education she paved with her choices. My life has been altered forever by her past decisions and her present encouragement and support of me and my education.

Over winter break, I spent a few days at my grandma's house, sharing memories—hers and mine. Once, when I was younger, she made me promise never to marry at 18. At this, I had laughed and solemnly swore to wait until I was “more responsible.” When my grandma was 18,

she was a sophomore at the Stout Institute, where she was busy taking classes, including physiology and anatomy, and working in the college print shop for 25 cents an hour. It was in the print shop where my grandma met my grandpa, a recently returned veteran of World War II, and they were married the next summer. Here is where my grandma diverged from the norm. She stayed in school. She stayed in school even though some faculty women at the Institute told her that women did not return to college after getting married. My grandparents lived off a meager monthly stipend of 90 dollars from the G.I. bill along with some money from part-time jobs while attending college. The next year, she dropped out after becoming pregnant with their first child in 1948. She would say she was on the six-year plan, returning to college two years later to finish her degree. In 1951, when my grandpa finished his undergraduate degree, she too graduated from the Stout Institute receiving a bachelor of science degree in Home Economics Education, with two minors—science and social science. However, the really amazing fact is that she *graduated*. After graduation, they moved to Colorado Springs, Colorado, where my grandpa was offered a teaching position at Colorado Springs High School.

Ruth Thomas, my grandma, was a changer, a mover, and a shaker. While in Colorado, she was offered a part-time position teaching nursery school for preschoolers at the Colorado Springs Vocational School. This time was filled with fond memories for my grandma—she was blessed with a job she loved, a husband who provided, and a toddler and new baby girl she adored. Her second job at the vocational school was teaching a course called Reupholstery, Slip-covering, and Drapery Making. She really enjoyed interacting with the class, remembering the variety of adult students and diversity of skill sets. Once, two of her students were actually teachers of Home Economics from Colorado Springs High School. This was one of the first times she realized what a thorough education she had received in Home Economics from Stout,

for although she was younger and less experienced than these teachers, her skills exceeded theirs. Teaching in that classroom, she realized her strengths and grew in self-confidence, leading her to aim higher and not settle for good enough.

Three years later, my grandparents moved back to Menomonie, Wisconsin, where Grandpa received his M.S. degree at Stout and Grandma taught Home Economics at a local high school. The next move was to DeKalb, Illinois, and, again, Grandma taught at the high school, while Grandpa taught at Northern Illinois University. While teaching there, Grandpa received his doctorate degree in Education from the University of Northern Colorado by attending mostly during the summers. However, life was not always easy. My grandma once told me that families with two working parents did not operate as they do now. While men were not expected to help with household duties, a woman with a career was not free from the expectations of her being a homemaker. She reminisced about this period of her life, pride flitting across her face like it had been waiting for permission to surface. It seeped into her voice as a little laugh of excitement while she spoke. At times, she was taking 18 to 19 credits of difficult classes per semester, doing student teaching, earning better grades than ever before, caring for their children, keeping house, ironing her husband's shirts, cooking dinner every night, and participating in church and social activities. During this period, she was also moving around the country following my grandpa in his career. Although she is very proud of everything she accomplished during this period, the fact remains that the expectation in the 1950s was that “living the good life” for women involved being only homemakers. According to the PBS documentary *Makers: Women Who Make America*, the idea that keeping house made women happy was the prevailing mindset of the time period. Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, a revolutionary book about the happiness, or lack thereof, of women in the home. She argued that they had very

good educations but were unable to use them. These educated homemakers felt that something must be wrong with them—that they were strange, different. *The Feminine Mystique* proved to women everywhere that they were not alone; there were many women who wanted to do more in life than keep a home. My grandma was able to break away from this expectation and pursue her education, but she still had to pay the price of working inside and outside the home.

In 1966, my grandpa was offered a position at UW--Stout. They moved back to Menomonie in the fall, now with three children. Grandma thought she had retired, but after a few years of volunteering and card playing, she decided to go back to school. After receiving a teaching assistant position, she taught half-time and took classes half-time, completing her master of science degree from UW--Stout in 1973. She continued to work at UW--Stout in positions she loved until retiring in 1991. However, she never retired from changing the lives of those around her, never quit encouraging her children and grandchildren to pursue an education and to reject societal attempts to install a glass ceiling on dreams.

In middle school, my father asked me if I would be interested in attending an engineering summer camp for girls. At the time, engineering was my father's job, nothing more than a career to consider for the far, far future, but I said, "Sure, sounds interesting." Later I learned that my grandma was the one who found out about it, since it was hosted by UW--Stout. That week was life-changing for me. I entered STEPS (Science, Technology, and Engineering, Preview Summer) Camp for Girls an insecure, unsure little girl, but came out a confident girl who believed in the camp's motto that it was okay to be "Cute and Smart." I realized I was good at math and science and found machines, such as vacuum formers and injection molds, surprisingly interesting. One of the challenges we were given was to fold a six-by-six-inch piece of aluminum foil into a boat to hold quarters. Some girls teased me that mine looked like a bowl,

while they folded theirs into mini canoes. When we placed them into an aquarium and added quarters, mine was the last boat floating, holding a maximum load of 25 quarters. After my family picked me up at the end of the week, we went out to dinner with my grandma, and I spent the entire meal pouring out my enthusiasm and experiences. I remember my grandma smiling at me the entire time. When she could finally get a word in edgewise, she asked me, “So what did you learn?” I looked at her and responded, “I can do this and whatever I set my mind to.”

When I was in high school, my grandma and I spent a weekend together after I got back from my second experience at STEPS Camp, this time building and programming LEGO Mindstorm Robots. We discussed everything from my goals and aspirations to her experiences growing up during the Great Depression, all over cups of steaming coffee and homemade muffins. She had learned hard work from a young age, growing up on a farm where everyone had to work hard. She was reminiscing about her years of teaching and how so many young students were willing to settle for good enough. At this point, she looked me in the eye and stated, “Do not go through life striving for ‘good,’ instead strive for ‘great.’ You can do more than you think yourself capable of, and you can stand out more than you can ever dream.” Then she went into her office, dug around a bit, and came out with a poem she had clipped from a newspaper a long time ago. It was a ten-stanza poem entitled “Pretty Good” from the *Osgood File*; three of the stanzas I will never forget:

There once was a pretty good student,
Who sat in a pretty good class
And was taught by a pretty good teacher,
Who always let pretty good pass.

The pretty good student in fact was
Part of a pretty good mob.
And the first time he knew what he lacked was
When he looked for a pretty good job.

It was then, when he sought a position,
He discovered that life could be tough.
And he soon had a sneaky suspicion
Pretty good might not be good enough.

Through her wisdom and the medium of poetry, she had forever engrained in me the power and necessity of discipline and hard work, along with the confidence to pursue them.

Later on we discussed my intended major. She knew I was interested in engineering, but when I told her of my desire to double major in Mechanical Engineering and English, my grandma could not have been more supportive. She had edited piles of resumes over the years and knew many engineers who could not write, let alone communicate their ideas to others. More than anyone, she knew what it was like to do something that challenged the stereotype. She may not have been an engineer, but she received her *master's* during a time when women did not stay in college after getting married. Many things have changed since 1966, including the number of women who earn college diplomas, work full time, and even have careers in engineering. However, as my grandma taught me, it is not only what you decide to do, but how well you decide to do it.

Now I am at the University of Wisconsin--Madison, taking math and English courses, and loving them all. When people ask my major, watching their responses is always very entertaining. My fellow students usually reply with, "That's weird. You must be both left and right brained." However, my professors' responses follow a much different line: "Wow, an engineer who can understand the technology and explain it to co-workers and the public. Now that is a good idea." So although today in America women's education is not thought of as something unimportant, people still avoid the abnormal. Thanks to my grandma, I can attend college without the pressure to find a husband (although Grandma hopes that someday I will find a really good one); rather, I can start pursuing my education with the self-confidence and support to strike out on my own with the wisdom of shared memories. From my grandma, I know that history is created by hard-working initiators—people who did things *differently*, changing lives and the definition of normalcy. Different. Some say strange; some say good. Sounds like change to me.