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LIVING WITH A SCHIZOPHRENIC

“Your father is a paranoid schizophrenic”. I have heard this statement throughout my life. From grandparents, parents, siblings and whoever wanted to throw their two cents in. Although I never understood the complexity of this simple sentence until now. Technically a schizophrenic has damage to the frontal lobes in their brain. This can be caused by excessive drug use or just through a genetic imperfection. This damage causes the person to have visual and auditory hallucinations that can be potentially dangerous for the person or the people around them.

I moved in with my father when I was thirteen. I was so eager to leave the small town I was living in at the time that I ignored all of the warnings and advice my mother gave me. She had said that it was going to be hard for me to live with my father because he wasn't like everyone else. That summer I packed up and left.

My father at the time was living in my grandparent's house. He hadn't been able to keep a steady job for twenty years, ever since he was diagnosed. This of course didn't strike me as odd because this is how I had always known him to be. I asked my grandmother why he was always in his room either sleeping or watching television and she said that it was because his medication made him tired all the time.

A year later he was on a new medication and he was like a different person. He came upstairs to eat dinner with the family and he started to play guitar and write. After many excited conversations we decided to move out of my grandparent's house and into an apartment. This is when I really began to realize what his illness was all about.

There were little things that would aggravate me about him. He didn't put his dishes in the sink after he ate; he would leave empty cigarette packages around when he started a new pack; he never helped with the chores around the house, like cleaning and laundry. When I would ask him to do these things he would nod and tell me he'd get to it when he had the energy.

Over time my frustration grew beyond my control and every couple of months I would yell and scream at him, feeling that there was no other way that I could get through to him.

I asked my grandmother why he was like this and she would say that the medication he was on dulled his motivation. But I couldn't understand why he couldn't do these things when he was at home all day sleeping or watching television.

Then as time drew on I began to accept my father's flaws and weaknesses. I realized all of the accomplishments he had made; being able to budget his money; putting out three or four books of poetry; getting on with his life. I realized that, even though he looked like an ordinary person, he wasn't and the things that he did do were incredible.

The law of life that I have learned, living with my father, is hard to name with words. It is the ability to love someone despite their flaws, having patience with people that don't do things the way you think they should, and being able to recognize the feats that he has made even though to some people they would seem like regular day to day responsibilities. My law of life is all of this and more. I have gained the friendship of a man I hardly knew when I first lived with him. We have shared tears, joys and much more. Even though it is an ongoing ordeal, I wouldn't have changed my experiences for the world, as it has given me the ability to live with people's flaws.

Jeff Danko Runner-Up

One of the biggest heroes in my life, and a person I admire very much is my Grandmother. I admire and respect her for the challenges and tough experiences she has faced in her life, growing up on the Prairies during the Depression. Her life was very difficult, compared to mine today. Learning what life was like for her as a child and the many hardships she had to overcome taught me that one of the most important rules in life is 'Don't take anything in life for granted and appreciate what you have'. She also taught me to think of others, not just myself, and that it is important to have goals in life. My Grandma is a very caring and loving person and I admire her for this and also for her courage and determination. She has great strength of character and I believe the world would be a much better place if there were more people like her.

From an early age, my Grandmother had huge responsibilities around the house. When she was about 6 years old, her father moved their family from Brandon, Manitoba to a farm in Saskatchewan. The farm needed lots of help and there were 10 people in her family, including 5 older brothers and 2 younger sisters. Her chores began early in the morning. As well as getting ready for school and helping out with breakfast, she also fed and watered the chickens, geese and ducks that were raised on the farm. By contrast, I sometimes think that it is hard getting up in the morning and just getting myself dressed and out the door for the 3 minute walk up the hill to school. Grandma's school started much earlier and was about 3 miles away, which she had to walk, except for sometimes when the horses were not needed for work on the farm. She appreciated being able to go to school and loved to learn, even though it was difficult and not considered a priority, with all of her chores and responsibilities on the farm coming first.

At the age of 12, my Grandma was taken out of school and sent to work as a mother's helper on another farm. She milked cows, scrubbed floors, set tables, washed dishes and made beds. She worked 7 days a week and her pay was \$5.00 per month. She came home once a month and all the money was given to her parents. She made these sacrifices and didn't complain, because there was a depression and her goal was to help to support her family through it. By comparison, I could not even think what it would be like to go away at that young an age, living with an unfamiliar family and only visiting my family once a month. I can imagine that I would have a much greater appreciation for my family if this were the case.

My Grandma's first big job came at about age 14, when she went to work at a hotel in the nearest town, about 12 miles away. Her pay was \$30 a month, which allowed her to set up an account at the general store. Each month, her father would come to the town to purchase goods for the family and farm with her pay. If she was lucky, she would be left with a dollar or two for herself. I can't imagine working that hard today, only to see my pay going to buy shoes for my brothers.

At age 16, my Grandmother left Saskatchewan and moved to Winnipeg. She met my Grandfather who was at college there. They went on a few dates until my Grandpa finished college and joined the air force. He was shipped to Toronto. My Grandma joined him there and they were soon married. They had 5 sons and lived in many different places in Ontario, Quebec and Europe.

My Grandma has lived a difficult but interesting life. As she has had a heart attack, she is not able to work as hard as she likes to, but she does appreciate all she has and especially having her family and grandchildren around her. I always enjoy going to visit her and hearing what it was like 'when I was your age'. She sometimes jokes and asks if I would like to have traded places with her. I know I wouldn't, but I will always remember my Grandma as the strong, independent and hard-working role model she is, and appreciate the lessons learned from her experiences. The one that always stands out whenever I visit is 'don't take anything for granted and appreciate what you have'.