

An Immigrant's Dream

Immigrant is a word we hear all the time in America; on the news, social media, at school, and from politicians. While it seems like many people have strong opinions about immigrants, some do not know what it means to be an immigrant, or the challenges immigrants face. An immigrant is, 'a person who has come to live permanently in a country that is not their own (Immigrant, Oxford Dictionary).' Immigrants often leave their country because they want better opportunities and a different life for themselves and for future generations. They face challenges that many Americans don't even think about, such as leaving family behind, not having a job or a place to stay in their new country, not knowing the language, and not being welcomed because of their appearance, religion, and culture.

My grandmother, Frosso Schneider, came to the United States from Greece in 1966 when she was 23 years old. She came from a poor family that lived in Athens. She grew up with her parents, siblings, and grandmother, and she has memories of a happy childhood with her family and friends (Schneider, Frosso). During high school, my grandma had a friend who longed to go to America, but her parents forbade it. She told my grandmother that if she ever had the chance to leave Greece, she should. It seemed like something small at the time, but after my grandmother graduated college with a degree in social work, her favorite teacher also told her to go to America. My grandmother was the top of her class, and there was a great job opportunity as a social worker in Athens. Unfortunately, another woman who also studied social work, was able to get the job because she had something the Greeks call *μεισων* (pronounced Meson), and translates as 'connections.' If you had connections with the right people, you could get a good job. Because of her connections, the other woman secured the job.

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After she lost the job, my grandmother felt there was nothing for her in Greece, no matter how hard she tried. She remembered her friend and teacher's advice about America. She applied to the Fulbright program for a scholarship to study abroad and follow her dream. The news came through the mail. When she opened the letter, she couldn't believe her eyes. My grandmother received a scholarship to attend Portland State University! Fortunately, her mother gave her permission to go. Her father was less excited, but in the end, she was allowed. She boarded a boat from Athens to New York to begin the next chapter of her life.

After a week-long journey, she took a train from New York to Portland, Oregon to start a masters of social work. She was one of almost 70,000 Greek immigrants who made the journey to the U.S. between 1960-1969 (Department of Homeland Security Yearbook 2008). At Portland State, my grandmother got involved in many social justice movements. The one she remembers the clearest was the Civil Rights Movement, where Americans were protesting against racial segregation and the oppression of African Americans (Clayborne Carson). She remembers hearing Martin Luther King Jr. speak on the radio, and how participating in this movement made her feel more included as an American.

Earning her degree in a new country was not easy, and there were hardships. The scholarship was for tuition, but she still had to pay for food, rent, and books. Some people thought the solution was to introduce her to Greek-American men whose families wanted a daughter-in-law from Greece; but my grandma had no interest in marrying any time soon. To earn money, she decided to work as a nanny. The family said that my grandma could stay in their house, rent free while she helped them. My grandma thought this was a good deal. The work was

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hard, and my grandma loved the child. At first, she had a good experience, but then things started to get tough. The family expected my grandma, who was a young woman, to stay up at night with the baby while the parents slept. Because of all the work, my grandmother started missing classes. The family wanted her to change her school schedule to help with the baby more. She felt she couldn't quit because she needed money and housing. A classmate saw my grandmother's situation and offered to take her in, no strings attached. To this day, my grandma is so thankful and calls the classmate "a savior." Her life was back on track, and she could focus now on what she had been working toward the whole time—a Master of Social Work.

After graduating, my grandmother got the job she dreamed of at an elementary school. She worked with kids and families to help them solve problems at school and at their homes. Some kids were bullied because of the clothes they wore or the way they looked. Some kids had a sick parent, and my grandma was a good listener who knew how to make the children feel better. Many families were grateful for how she improved their lives with her kind heart. My grandmother worked with many kids that were Palestinian refugees, and she understood their challenges because of her experience as an immigrant. She was recognized as one of the best counselors because of the lives she changed.

Today, my grandmother has dementia. Even with her memory loss, she is still a good listener and storyteller. She remembers the story of her immigration vividly. Because of my grandmother, I have learned to be kind and build bonds with people that are different from me. This summer, I participated in Black Lives Matter protests with my family. It surprised me that after all the work my grandma and her generation did in the 1960's, people are still fighting so

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hard for justice (Kwadwo Frimpong). During these protests, I saw immigrant groups alongside African Americans, all working towards one thing- justice. I have heard my grandmother's story many times. It inspires me, and it is a gift.

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