

Who is an Everyday Hero that Brings Out the Optimism in You?

By definition, a hero is a person who is admirable because of their achievements, strong qualities, and courage. A hero could be an idol such as a celebrity, successful athlete, or simply one who exudes a tremendous amount of courage. Courage, by definition, is the ability to do something that may be frightening or outside of one's comfort zone. That person for me, is my grandfather, otherwise known as my Papa. He has always been a man of integrity, demonstrating strength in character, commitment to faith, and tremendous love for his family. He taught us the importance of hard work, and a strong work ethic, the value of service and commitment to community, but most importantly: he embraced us with love. While these qualities and actions are admirable to many, the story I would like to focus on is the love and the devotion that my Papa has for my grandmother, known to many as Mimi.

Approximately four years ago, during the summer before my Freshman year of high school, Mimi was diagnosed with dementia. Mimi, the matriarch of our family, was a fabulous cook and baker, maintained a tidy home and always ensured that bills were paid on time. She loved her garden and enjoyed planting flowers in the spring. At Christmas her home was always decorated with each room showcasing a reminder of the holiday. She was a nurse by trade, working in labor and delivery and later in an obstetrics/gynecology office in town. Her patients and colleagues respected her and it was not uncommon for us to run into a former patient when out in the community, who admired her. She was and continues to be an engaged grandmother, whether aware of where she is or who her company may be. She was a very kept woman. She was a generous and giving woman, always doing the little extras for friends, families, coworkers, and fellow parishioners.

The decline was initially slow at first, but over the last year our family has noted significant changes in Mimi. She has not cooked or baked in recent years. She no longer does laundry. She requires help planting flowers in the Spring. She no longer pays the bills. There are no more calls from Mimi just to check in. She does not always brush her hair. She often wears the same clothing. She can no longer carry on a conversation. She may or may not remember our names. The Mimi I have grown to know, love, and respect, is different, and while it saddens me to see her decline, we all embrace the change with love and patience. However, my hero through this dramatic change is my Papa.

Papa has now taken over household responsibilities that Mimi used to manage with ease over the past fifty-seven years of their marriage. He has learned to cook and bake. He always brings us samples of his baked goods. He has taken over responsibility for cleaning their old farmhouse as well as managing the laundry. He decorates the house at Christmas, but always encourages her help in the process. In addition, he maintains their two plus acres of land. He has become her advocate in healthcare, attending her appointments as her historian. He brings her to the activities of his grandchildren, which keeps her active and engaged in the community. He has given up or has drastically reduced his participation in some of his favorite hobbies, such as golf, umpiring, and officiating football, as my Mimi cannot be left alone. He purchased an old car, which is his new pride and joy and he and my Mimi can attend car shows together. He always arrives hand in hand with my Mimi and leaves hand in hand with my Mimi. He has become her caregiver, ensuring that she is bathed, dressed, and fed. He takes her twice weekly to adult day care, and while one would assume that he would use this time for himself, he chooses to volunteer at the center to be close to his wife and to give back to the facility. His patience and compassion are admirable, and while he admits that some days are hard, he continues to view each day optimistically as another day while her dementia progresses.

Dementia is a disease referred to as the long goodbye. It is sad and painful to watch your loved one, one who is admired by many, slip into darkness. My Papa handles this change with optimism, faith, grace, courage, confidence, patience, and most importantly with love. He has taught us all the importance of commitment while vowing to always love her, in good times and bad, sickness and in health. He is not only admirable, but he is my hero.