

PART ONE:

When the year 2020 began, I had high hopes. I was at a new school, making good money, planning on visiting friends, running marathons, and studying abroad in the fall semester. Once COVID hit, all of my plans and excitement for the year simply vanished. As the year has progressed, the world has been hit left and right with social, economic, and environmental disasters. In these moments of sadness, confusion, and desperation, I have found my 'defining moment'. The realization that things will get worse has changed my life; it has taught me that although everything may crash and burn, I will always get through to the other side. As history replays itself in different forms, I've begun to realize that those before me have lived through the same things, cried at the injustice, frowned at their bank accounts, and felt the everyday stresses and anxiety from the world around them. Knowing this has been reassuring; its the knowledge that, yes, things could get better, but they could also worsen that has pushed me to look inward and find peaceful moments that bring the feeling of contentment. I find comfort in knowing that those before me lived through wars, polio, economic turmoil, powerful social movements, and environmental catastrophes but still get up every day to continue. I now know that I will get through this, through this pandemic, through the tough conversations with family members, through the world's cynical exterior, through the stress and the feeling of being trapped. I know all of this because I know it can always worsen, but it just might get better.

PART TWO:

My great-grandmother, Mamal Sue, has lived a full life, one that has been full of loss, pain, joy, and abundance. But, when asked about her ‘defining moment,’ she chopped it up to going back to work after retirement to spend ten years at a cell phone company after they had first come out. I was not too thrilled with this answer as I know she has more stories to tell. So I pushed and began to make up questions that I was ‘supposed’ to ask her. During the Great Depression, she grew up in a small town in Oklahoma with a Native American father and white mother. Although she has never really talked about her parents or her time as a child in a poverty-stricken era, she has hinted at the racial tension she experienced as a mixed-race young lady in a time that was not as accepting of this. Her first experience with loss was when her oldest sister, Nova, died of Polio. After graduating high school, she married my Papal, who immediately went to serve in WWII aboard the USS Nashville, leaving her to give birth alone to my great uncle and grandmother. After my great-grandfather returned from the war, he finished college at Indiana State University and, after graduating, served for the Air Force in the Korean War and, eventually, the Vietnam War. When asked about how she managed with now three teenagers all by herself, she simply said, “well, we got through it.” At only twenty-eight years old, her third child, Larry, died in a tragic car accident. And, after over fifty years of marriage, my Papal passed away. Trying to identify a person’s “defining moment” for them is challenging. Was it the day she was born? Maybe it was the loss of her son, or maybe her husband. Or, perhaps, after everything she has been through, everything she has accomplished, and the family she raised that continues to grow, it was merely the seemingly small act of coming out of retirement to continue being present in a new era of life. When asked what her motto for her life was, she stated, “it always turned out good, I can’t complain.”

I believe there is a lot to learn from our ancestors, whether that be the value of a dollar or of quality time. But, the most significant thing that I learned from my great-grandmother's story was that it will always turn out okay, and even if it doesn't, I will get through it.