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1st Place Essay - ENGL 1000 Literacy Autobiography Contest 2017

Danuta Chlebek

Governors State University, dchlebek@student.govst.edu

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Danuta Chlebek

Professor Laura White

Literacy Narrative Contest

As I was preparing to write my literacy narrative, I faced a difficult decision about choosing the best method to transform my anger, frustration, tears of sorrow and joy into words. How was I to write down what was inside my heart so that the reader could see how lucky they are to have certain skills and abilities that they take for granted. Not knowing the answer, I turned to those individuals with more knowledge and experience in writing than myself and whom I could trust to tell me the entire truth about my piece. One of them was Professor White. From withstanding the constant flow of emails with new drafts to meeting with her during office hours, Professor White took the extra time to make sure that my literacy narrative really portrayed the message that I wanted to give to the reader: a message of perseverance and being true to yourself. I also utilized my peers from the Honors Program. They helped me in crafting my literacy narrative into being consistently narrated in the 2nd person and making sure that it was interesting for younger readers. Overall, my revision process consisted of small little grammatical changes to big ones like changing the perspective. But personally, I believe the greatest revision was the decision to write this story down and share it with others. At the beginning, I was going to go simple and write a literacy narrative about a completely different subject. But then it dawned on me that this was something I must do to fully fulfill the promise I uttered at my grandfather's grave. Sharing my story allowed me to finally be proud of whom I am and where I come from.

I will not be available to read on GSU Research Day

In What Land Does The Heart Lie?

In a country where so many people trace their lineage back to faraway lands, it has become very common to hear about the struggles faced with being uprooted from the lands of the forefathers and blindly thrust into the twists and turns of the American culture. There is nothing wrong with sharing the experience of being afraid to leave the comfort of the home and stepping into a foreign world. Times like those shape a person's character, strength, and perseverance. The inexperienced believe that getting used to the new culture can be the most important struggle an immigrant must overcome. But making a new home in a foreign land is only one side of a coin. It is the struggle between the life left behind and the hope of getting something greater in exchange that becomes a real issue. Every immigrant has to face a battle where the soul is at stake. It is a confrontation occurring in the innermost chambers of the heart between who you are and what others are trying to make you to be. This is such a story of finding out where one's heart may lie

It all started on a warm, autumn afternoon. The sun was already low in the sky creating an extravaganza of shadows. On one of the side streets lined with trees whose leaves were already changing hues walked a girl carrying a lunch bag in one hand and a book in the other. She shuffled her feet alongside her mother and the only sound between them was the constant crackling of stepped on dried leaves. The child took no notice of her peers enjoying the last warm evenings of the year by playing outside or the cool breeze that rustled the yellowing and dried up plants in strangers' gardens. Instead her mind was boggling around one question " How am I going to say this" Her mom had told her earlier that they needed to go to the post office to pick up some stamps and she knew what that meant. She would be forced to stand in front of someone, her hands knitted

closely together to prevent shaking, her heart beating in her chest ready to pop out and the throat suddenly parched dry as she would struggle to find the right words to come out. Though almost five years has passed since she made the journey across the Atlantic, the thought of speaking and translating was a frightening one. But there was nothing she could do. Her parents needed her and if they found the strength to leave the country behind for her sake then she must find the courage inside as well.

With a heavy heart, they took their place in the long and twisting line full of frustrated people. As they waited for their turn to be called, the two of them conversed in their native language. She felt everyone's eyes on them and it caused her heart to rapidly flutter and her grasp on the lunchbox painfully tightened. Out of the corner of her eye she saw two women wearing sunglasses and high inched heels standing right behind them, their faces disfigured by the uttermost face of disgust imagined. They were whispering between themselves until one of them pointed to her. In a loud voice so that everyone could hear her, she said to her companion

“GOSH!!! Don't you think it isn't fair that these immigrants come to America and do not even speak English?”

“I know right” her companion replied” if they wanted to speak that way they could have just stayed where they came from. “

“No wonder they can never be Americans since they don't want to speak English. They will always be nothing more than housemaids and cleaners.”

. Tears sprung to her eyes even though it was not the first time she had heard similar words spoken to people of her kind. Their staring eyes, mispronounced names, the

repetition of questions about where they come from and her eyes never leaving the ground she walked on occurred on a regular basis. It never bothered her before because she loved the country she came from. Her grandfather always said that in her veins flows the blood of the innocent men and women who died for her to have the right to speak in the language of her forefathers. She should never be embarrassed to use it. She did not understand what he meant but now it dawned on her.

It was the blood flowing in her that made everyone treat her differently. Her heritage made her unacceptable to the community. The only way to be able to stand tall, have friends and really make a home in this new country was to erase her past identity as soon as possible. She would follow in the same footsteps as some of her friends who not only refused to attend Saturday school but also spoke only English to their friends and even family. They said it was the only way to lose that constant name tag of being foreign born. Never again would she let anyone criticize her for her heritage. It would be an end of the old self and instead become the American everyone wanted her to be.

Her idea did work. Though she still spoke her native language to her parents and other family members across the ocean, everything else that tied in with her heritage was placed at a minimum. She ate bologna sandwiches on white bread for lunch, read everything in English and stood proudly when the entire school stood up for the Pledge of Allegiance. Now she hanged out with the “cool American kids”. No one commented her on her foreign accent when she read or asked her about where she came from.

But whatever she did, there was still the ominous feeling of a Bourbon lily entrenched on her skin all the way to the soul about her true identity. She sensed that the smell of cabbage, sauerkraut and meat went in her clothes, on her backpack, even on the

palm of the hand. Every time she saw her father's weak smile or the tear strained face of her mother, she knew that they were disappointed in her. She explained it to herself that they decided to come to this land so there should be no reason they have to find fault in the fact that they must fit in.

Her cold heart and locked in stupidity suddenly changed during the summer before the fifth grade. Her parents had this stupid idea to visit the homeland. Despite protests, she was put on the plane and nine hours later found herself on the same airport she had first taken off from at the age of five. She tried to keep her heart frozen as promised herself but seeing the gnarled hands of her grandmother that would gently brush her hair, smelling the aroma of her aunt's homemade cooking and seeing the home that she spent the happiest years of her life, the ice melted away. When visiting the grave of her grandfather who had died years before, she suddenly fell onto the wet ground and tears came bursting forth from her eyes. She had realized the shame she had caused her homeland by denying it. So many people fought for independence of this land and she had decided to let it go, considering it to be unworthy of her person. She had let everyone down but that would no longer be the case. She swore then and there that once she got back to the U.S, she would once again become literate in the context of her language and culture.

This is what she did. No longer was attending Saturday School a hassle for her. She took every necessary step to relearn the language and the writing. She read everything she could about the history of the country and what it meant to be part of it. It was difficult to pronounce the wording and the sounds of comments behind her back as before did not make it any better. But now it did not seem as important as before. Everywhere she went

she mentioned her Polish heritage without a trace of embarrassment. She stood up proudly whenever the Polish anthem was sung and even was brave enough to invite her friends over for Polish food. Though she realized that it will be impossible to erase all those years of illiteracy and shame, there is nothing that will stop her from pursuing it.

She had won the battle of not only learning English but most importantly finding her own path of living in a distant land. She had to decide what is more important to her: the person she wanted to become or the person she had never left behind. Now that meant reconsidering everything she ever sought but her love for a nation where her heart lies came back stronger than ever before.