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2nd Place Essay - ENGL 1000 Literacy Autobiography Contest 2018

Alexandria Pavloski

Governors State University, apavloski15@gmail.com

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Alexandria Pavloski

Professor Laura White

Stuck in Silence

When I first sat down to write my literacy narrative, I had no idea what direction I would go in. There have been few times in my life where I was able to feel the deep impact of literacy, and I was having trouble finding a story with passion in it. I ended up deciding to just pick something to start writing about and see where it took me, a journey which I was ultimately unprepared for.

The first draft of my paper was really just me reaching for the bones of the story. I gave an outline of the events and the emotions and as a result, the words felt empty to me. There was nothing there that made me feel the authenticity of what I was trying to say. I got feedback from my peers and professor saying the same thing, but I did not know how I was going to fix it or if I thought it was even worth fixing. Unsatisfied with my work, I walked from it, unsure if I was going to continue with it in the future.

As time went on though, I found myself thinking about this paper, knowing that it had more to it but unsure what that more was. I forced myself to really think about the story I was telling and what it meant to me. I pushed myself to find the deeper truth of it all because I knew that my story was not just an outline, that it had real meaning and that I had something I needed to get out of me. After months of deliberation and self-conflict I sat down with the original draft and glanced through it, trying to find the places where I could add something to say what I needed to, but I encountered a problem: the outline of the story was so empty and cold that adding heart to it in one or two places would not give it the warmth that it needed. I ended up scrapping the entire paper and starting over.

This time, the words flowed from my brain to the paper in an almost seamless way and I had this feeling of fullness as I went. I discovered the real meaning of my writing and saw my story in a new light. It was not about the things I could not overcome, but the way in which I learned from my struggle and grew as a person. Through my revisions, I was able to not only say what I wanted to say, but I was also able to do it in a way that I think could inspire other people, because I was able to show that even if you do not come out of a challenge victorious, that does not mean that you failed.

I am available to present my essay at GSU Research Day if it is selected.

Stuck in Silence

My mother was born to deaf parents. Having full hearing, she often accompanied her parents to many places, such as the deaf club or a friend's house, in case they needed a "translator". Since body and sign language were the main modes of communication she used most of her life, my mother not only expanded her ability to sign, but she also built friendships with other hearing-impaired people from a very young age. After her parents died however, a lot of these friendships fell apart, and by the time I was born, sign language was somewhat of a lost practice with my mother.

Since my grandparents died before I was born, I never grew up in an environment where sign language was used or even needed for that fact. Hearing stories about my grandparents gave me the desire to learn it though. Knowing that I would never be able to know them personally, I thought that maybe I could have some sort of connection to them if I learned sign language. Being the eager child I was, I begged my mother to teach me and she quickly agreed. She tried to teach me a few signs right when I asked her, but she moved her hands so fast that I was not able to fully grasp the motions. Seeing that I was struggling, she went out and bought me a beginners book that was sort of like a dictionary, but instead of containing definitions, it had pictures showing the hand movements step by step for each word. The first thing it taught was the alphabet and the numbers one through twenty. I picked these up rather quickly and soon

moved on to learning some simple words such as "apple" and "book". I eventually worked through the entire book learning one word after the next, but I never mastered any of it. I never had to use this language actively, and after keeping with the practice for a little while, I grew bored and fell away from it, almost forgetting that I ever wanted to learn it at all.

My memory of wanting to learn returned when I was getting to be a teenager. On a trip to Chicago, my parents and I were visiting some of our favorite places that we used to frequent when we lived there. We were ending our night by grabbing some dinner at this little hole-in-the-wall pizza place called Phil's. We were sitting at a lopsided wooden table being taunted by the smells of tomato sauce and melting cheese, impatiently waiting for our pizza to come out, when someone came up and tapped my mother on the shoulder. As soon as my mother turned around to see who was trying to get her attention, the face on this older, white-haired gentleman lit up, and a smile overtook his aged face. He started signing to my mom and after a few minutes, she told my father and me that this man was a friend of my grandparents. She introduced him to her family but being unable to understand any of the gestures they were making to each other, I sat there just smiling. After catching up for a bit, the man left. All through the rest of dinner, while my mom was telling us about him, I was thinking about the way I felt when I was sitting there. Not wanting to feel like an outsider again, I asked my mom if she would be willing to teach me how to sign. When we got home, we dusted off the old beginners book and started from the basics once again.

After meeting up with her old friend at the pizza place, they started texting and emailing each other. After a few months of keeping in touch, my family was invited to go to a graduation party for his son. Being the antisocial person that I am, the thought of a party did not really appeal to me, but oddly enough, I still found myself wanting to go. Having a few months of

signing practice under my belt, I felt like I was ready to take the next step and have a conversation with someone other than my mom. As the party drew closer, my excitement kept growing.

The day of the party finally arrived, and as my dad drove us to the community center a few towns away, warm summer air flowing through the open windows, I sat quietly in the back seat, practicing a few signs last minute. The car ride flew by and after a few more minutes of travel, we arrived at the community center. As we walked through the squeaky metal doors and stepped onto the scuffed up wooden floor of the humid gym, all the confidence that I built up had shattered. I looked around at all of the people speaking rapidly with their hands and felt extremely out of place. It was like I was thrown into another timeline where everything happening around me was at double the speed. Hoping that these feelings would wash away once this first impression passed, I found a seat and tried my best to stay optimistic.

Eventually, a few of the other deaf people there approached my mother, and I saw this as an opportunity to observe their conversation before jumping in. Almost as soon as they started talking, I found it difficult to follow the discussion. Not only did I have a hard time telling who they were directing their words at, but I also did not know a lot of the gestures that they were making. Every now and then, I would see someone give a thumbs up, spelling out the letter "A", and occasionally I would see somebody put their thumb to their chin, giving the sign for mother, but other than those few instances, I had no idea what was going on. I tried to study the conversation closer, but as I paid more and more attention, I realized how little I knew. There were so many words that I could verbalize in a second, but did not know how to express, so many things that I wanted to say but could not, so many stories I wanted to hear, but I could not hear a single one. My mom tried to help me out by filling me in as best she could, but as more

people joined the conversation, it was harder for her to keep me in the loop, and nobody else there really showed an interest in talking to me either. Other than looking at me when my mother told them who I was, they completely ignored me. I sat there for the rest of the night, completely and utterly clueless.

After that party, I became even more insistent to learn the language. I went out and bought myself a thicker, more advanced book of signs and slowly tried to master them all. Every day, I would sit down, open up to a new page, and try to teach myself the dozen or so words on it. The further I got in the book, the more confusing the diagrams and instructions got. Even though my mom would try to help me figure it out when I asked her, I constantly fell short. There are just so many ways to say the same thing, and it was impossible for me to learn them all through a book that only gave the standard. My mom kept trying to work with me, but no matter how much I tried, I still struggled to follow a conversation and come up with my own response fast enough to keep one going.

Even though I eventually gave up on learning the language, it still holds its importance in my life. Until that party, I never understood what it was like to be limited by a language gap of any sort. Up to that point, sign language was just a fun thing for me to try and learn in my free time. I never realized how the words we say everyday can make someone feel completely out of place if they cannot say them like everyone else. I realized how crucial it is to have literacy, to be able to understand the people around you, and just how hard it is to do that when you have no words at all.