

Final Project

I was born Christine Parsons on May 19, 1970, in Salt Lake City, Utah, 3rd daughter to Lewis and Ramona, who were divorced shortly after I was born. Since neither one had as much interest in raising their children as they did in making them, my oldest sisters Stephanie, Debra and I were sent to live with our maternal grandparents. Actually, Steph had been living with them already from the time she was 1. My mother had remarried and had 2 more children, a girl named Dawn and a boy named Simon. Debra and I adored our stepdad, and affectionately referred to him as “Daddy Kim”. But they soon divorced and Dawn and Simon went to live with Kim’s parents, and Deb and I went to live with Oma and Opa, all of us to separate “grandparents alone” family structures. Deb and I were 4 and 3, respectively.

Oma and Opa were very proud, hardworking, old fashioned Dutch immigrants who came to America shortly after WWII. Oma had lost her 1st husband in the war, with whom she had 3 daughters. She met and married Opa after he (miraculously) survived Dachau, and together they had my mother Ramona in 1948, coming to the states shortly thereafter. Oma and Opa instilled in my sisters and me a rich appreciation of their Dutch heritage, but it was something they had a hard time reconciling with American customs and traditions. My sisters and I became aware of the cultural differences at an early age as well. We were bilingual from a young age because only Dutch was spoken at home. That is something I am very proud of. They sent us to St. Ann School where my sister Steph and I excelled academically, but Debra struggled. Oma would make Deb and I wear woolen “shawls” in the winter, and the other kids would make fun of us and call us “Little Red Riding Hood”. We had a hard time being bullied. Young children can be so

mean and quick to judge, unlikely, maybe unable, to take time to understand and appreciate the differences. Sometimes I think they bully because they *don't* understand.

Oma and Opa often took us on trips to Wendover with them. While they gambled, my sisters and I would swim. Opa would often come out with us and try to teach us how to dive. (I was always too afraid. He was always the one who took us places for fun, be it ice skating, swimming or to movies. Sometimes he would sneak us to see our mother. Our separation from her was difficult at first, and Oma forbid us to have contact with her. Yet she was Opa's only child.) In August 1980, Oma and Opa went on a trip to Wendover together, just the 2 of them, leaving the 3 of us with our paternal grandparents. It was their 1st trip since Opa had had a heart attack about a year before and had a pacemaker put in. It was also their last. Opa passed away in the casino. We were all beyond ourselves with sadness, and I don't know that Oma was ever able to accept it. It left huge holes in our hearts. She never went to Wendover again.

Within 5 years of Opa's passing, Steph and Deb had moved out and on with their lives, each one being a bit more rebellious, but much more courageous and confident than I ever was. Although our home was one of high family function, being raised in such a strict environment, very different from the one we experienced at school and with our paternal grandparents, was really hard, trying to make sense of the differences between the 2. I think it affected each one of us differently, and we each devised our own coping mechanisms. Unlike my sisters, I think I was more afraid to take risks, and also felt more of an obligation to stay with Oma. I did not want her to be alone.

I graduated from Judge Memorial in May 1988. It hurt me that no one from my family came to my graduation (although Oma was physically unable). I've always believed that

was a huge accomplishment, finishing high school. Sometimes I think it's one that is overlooked and not as valued in our society. It made me feel terribly alone. My intention when I finished was always to go to college, but things don't always go according to plan.

I began to have difficulty with Oma allowing me the freedom I thought a responsible 18 year old should have. I never felt I gave her any reason not to trust me. I think on her part it was greatly influenced by her cultural misunderstandings and unwillingness to accept that I was growing up, and fear that I would leave her. In an effort to be protective of my sisters and me and not end up alone, I think she drove us away and did end up alone. I have guilty feelings about that still. But she and I always remained close, and I was in constant contact with her.

After moving in and staying with my mother and her 4th husband Stan shortly after high school to escape Oma's leash, I quickly realized I needed a place of my own. My mother got extremely intoxicated one night and hit me. So I left and got my own place. I was 19. I started school at Westminster College in fall of 1990, had a decent job that I enjoyed, and felt like I was doing really well. I was enjoying my first taste of freedom and independence. I felt good! But it would be short lived. That October I found Oma at home slumped on her chair, unable to move and soaked with vomit and urine. She had had a massive stroke, and was also diagnosed with breast, liver and uterine cancers. She was put in a nursing home, and mercifully only lasted for 6 weeks before passing away. I like to think compression of morbidity took place, but I think she had silently endured suffering for some time. She didn't want to acknowledge it, never went to the doctor, and was good at keeping her pain to herself so no one noticed. Although she had lost a great

deal of weight, she would always attribute it to getting old. She had always been a robust woman, and after finding out just how sick she was and how much pain she had actually been in, that she had hid it for so long and I did not see it, still hurts me so. I am forever ashamed of myself. I will always feel so guilty about that. She was my mother.

After her passing I went into a deep depression. Things spiraled downward for me quickly. I had so much to take care of: finding a place where Oma could be taken care of as it was beyond my skillty, then planning her funeral, and the related costs; I had to take care of her home; I failed out of school; I had to keep working at a job that I knew was going nowhere in order to meet all the financial obligations that were quickly accumulating. To make matters worse, my paternal grandparents, who went to Arizona every year for the winter, had asked me to take care of their home while they were gone for the season. This was *before* Oma had her stroke. I was happy to do so to get out of my claustrophobic apartment and save a little money. So I had 3 places to take care of! Then in January of 1991 I got into a serious car accident and had to go to my mother's to recover because I had nowhere else to go. I've always loved my mother and years ago was able to realize that her giving us up to stay with Oman and Opa was really a great act of sacrificial love. She knew she couldn't take care of us. But I wanted to be with Oma.

This was definitely the hardest time of my life, the most traumatic, up to that point. There is nothing that compares to the loss of a loved one. I became very depressed, and was in therapy for 2 years, which I don't believe helped me. I have struggled with this condition consistently since this time. I've always been a sad person, even as a child, but that time in my life really hit me hard and I'm not sure I ever fully recovered, or gotten over the guilty feelings. But my children have helped me with that.

My kids make up all the good that came from my marriage. I wanted to continue to be friends with their dad, but he does not want that from me, and it makes me sad. I feel in some ways disappointed and betrayed by him, but he will always be the father of my kids, and I need to make every effort to make interactions and transitions with him as smooth as possible. We were married in April 1998, and today I am still waiting for my divorce to be final. My 4 children, Jack 13, Robbie 12, Paul 9, and Sydney 7, are the lights of my life. Robbie was diagnosed with autism when he was 3, and I have often wondered what part I played in the development of his disorder. From our text I learned that it is believed to have a “significant genetic component” in addition to environmental risks. After the birth of my 1st son I suffered from postpartum depression (no surprise), so my doctor prescribed Paxil, which I took throughout each one of my pregnancies and while I was nursing. I was told that it’s worth in helping me cope outweighed any side effects it may cause. I hope Robbie’s condition is not one of those “side effects”. I wish I had studied that more thoroughly. He is high functioning and will be starting middle school this fall in a cluster class. (He will be mainstreamed for a few.) His limitations lie mostly in his social interactions, but he is an incredibly sweet, affectionate boy.

I began this new journey in my life last summer after applying for school and filing for divorce. While I don’t know for certain what strength is in me, I do think I have displayed a great deal of resilience in my life with what I have had to overcome. I want to be in control of my destiny and make my kids proud of me. I want to accept and respect myself for who I am and eventually be at peace. I have a great deal of work to do.