

A Series of Small Things

My drive back to campus after a weekend at home always followed a familiar pattern. I would load my bags into the car, my mind already racing about the hectic upcoming week of organic chemistry labs, studying for my next quiz, and balancing all of that with my extracurricular commitments. It wasn't until I reached my dorm that the momentum would finally slow. When I would go to unpack, I'd find them. Tucked between a stack of sweaters and a heavy textbook were Tupperware containers filled with all my favorite foods.

My grandma never made a scene about these. She never waited for a thank you or made a big show of how much time she spent over the stove. She just quietly gave me her support in whatever way possible. In those moments, unpacking in my dorm room, the food felt like more than just a meal I didn't have to cook. It was a reminder that I was cared for. It was her way of saying she believed in me and where I was going.

Looking back, I realize those containers were my first real lessons in advocacy. We're often taught in order to make a difference, you need to be the loudest person in the room. You need to captivate the attention of all and lead the march. My grandma taught me, however, that sometimes the most profound impacts are the ones made in total silence, through the steady, intentional work of looking after one another.

At first glance, my grandma doesn't quite resemble the typical image for gender equality. She was a stay-at-home mother who genuinely loved cooking, crafting, and cleaning. Though these roles were often dismissed as limiting, my grandma saw her life as limitless. To her, empowerment wasn't about a specific job title; it was about the agency to unapologetically choose your own path. She was the strongest advocate I have ever known because she never once projected her own choices onto me. Instead, she treated my aspirations as sacred, a door she would do anything to hold open.

Her lesson became my lifeline when the "absence guilt" started to settle in. As someone who has always loved to keep busy, in the pursuit of my goals, I've had to make difficult trades. I've lost count of how many times I've been called "the absent one" by friends and family. These comments, though often meant as jokes, stung. It made it feel near impossible to prioritize my future without feeling like I was abandoning my present.

My grandma, however, did everything possible to reframe my mindset. She constantly reminded me of the importance of my aspirations and that investing time in myself was neither selfish nor neglectful, but necessary. She taught me that education doesn't put your life on hold but rather expands it to create possibilities that seem unimaginable.

Her lessons carried even more weight when I considered her own experiences. After my grandpa passed away at an early age, she was left to make ends meet without formal employment. She did not advocate loudly or publicly for herself but instead practiced what I now recognize as quiet productivity: working steadily, resourcefully, and persistently. She chose her battles

carefully, understanding that it was not about how long one holds the stage but more so what you actually do with the time you're on it.

This approach has changed how I understand equity and advocacy, particularly in healthcare. In medicine, we talk a lot about advocacy in terms of policy and big systemic changes. Though those are crucial, advocacy does not always require grand gestures. Often, it happens in small, consistent actions like listening to a patient when they're scared, noticing the small detail in a chart, or simply being there when others are at their most vulnerable.

My grandma lived by that philosophy every day. Whether she was sitting with a sick relative or making sure I didn't head back to school to an empty refrigerator, she was proof that looking after people is its own kind of strength. She taught me that a solid treatment plan or a correct diagnosis is only half the battle. Real healing requires preparation and empathy, anticipating what someone needs before they even have the words to say it.

If I were to sum up my grandma's lesson on advocacy in a quote, it would be Vincent van Gogh's words, "*Great things are done by a series of small things brought together.*" That was her life in a nutshell. It wasn't one big, flashy moment, but instead it was characterized by a thousand tiny, intentional choices. Every meal she packed and every sacrifice she made, never once complaining, built up the foundation I'm standing on today.

As I move forward in my own career in medicine, I want to pay that forward. I want to be the kind of person who supports others the way my grandma supported me: by offering a listening ear, sharing what I know, and being the person who reminds others that they belong when self-doubt starts to creep in. I might not always be the loudest person in the room or the one holding the microphone, but I will be the one who consistently shows up to put in the work. By doing so, I hope to continue the legacy of the women before me whose impact proves that persistence, compassion, and belief really can change the world, one small thing at a time.