Can You Hear Me Now?

I feel fortunate to have grown up in a three-generation household. While my parents have always supported me, it was my Oma, or grandmother, who raised me. As a child, I enjoyed being her “sous-chef” as she taught me how to cook traditional Eastern European foods like ‘kuechle’ and ‘rouladen’. It was always my personal challenge to cook from a recipe, then experiment to make it better. Oma showed me that the reward of cooking was not the food, but the smiles the food brought to loved one’s faces. Through these lessons, I discovered my passion for cooking and its value in bringing people together.

As I became busier, time became harder to find, but I always found time to cook for my family. While I cooked, Oma would tell stories about being displaced from her home, her struggles during World War II, and her humble beginnings as an immigrant in America. From her struggles, I have learned not to take my life for granted, and that no one’s future is set in stone.

As we both grew older, these stories began to repeat, sometimes even during the same sitting. I patiently listened to her stories, never faltering in my devotion, but it became clear that Oma was developing Alzheimer’s disease. Despite my family’s increased patience, Oma became less interactive and more isolated from the family. She began to prefer spending time alone in her room than with us. When the storytelling stopped, I knew something was truly wrong and I worried that I was losing my Oma.

It was when conversations with Oma grew progressively louder and we could hear the television through the walls that we realized that Oma suffered from not only memory loss, but also hearing loss. It was this combination that made her afraid of asking questions. A fear originating from either not hearing or forgetting answers, a fear of becoming a burden on the family. From my perspective, this couldn’t be further from the truth, but I could not convince her otherwise and she continued to disconnect herself from me and my family.

The solution to this problem was fairly simple. We bought Oma hearing aids, but the effect those small devices had on my family and I has been tremendous. The hearing aids solved Oma’s hearing problem, but also rid her of anxiety to interact with my family. Slowly, but surely, Oma, and her stories, returned back into my life. The hearing aids returned a part of my life that I didn’t want to give up, and this fact didn’t escape my attention. It was this firsthand experience of technology improving my life and my family’s life that sparked my interest in using engineering to help people. So, in a way, Oma once again introduced me to another one of my passions: applied science.

Through my leadership in my school’s technology organizations, I am helping to expand my high school’s science offerings. I am sharing the knowledge I have gained from summer college engineering courses by teaching, organizing projects and planning competitions. My goals have always been to include everyone, regardless of identity or experience, to create a welcoming community and help younger students find a passion in technology, like I have.

Last summer, a day before summer camp began, I was told that, due to a mix-up, I would be running the boy scout camp kitchen and would need to feed over one hundred campers. As I taught my inexperienced kitchen staff, I couldn’t help but remember when I was in their place, with my Oma teaching me how to cook. I realized the passions and lessons Oma imparted on me not only prepared me for success, but have become a part of who I am.

Oma, I’ve been listening to you, and I hear you loud and clear.

G TECH ESSAY 1:

For me, being able to pursue my education outside of school is equally as important as learning in class. I could follow my passions in technology by myself, but through experience with my school's engineering and coding club, I have found that working with other students allows for innovation. Georgia Tech hosts a community of students, interested in technology, who have a variety of passions. I am interested in working with these students on projects that combine multiple fields. Georgia Tech not only innately creates this learning environment, but encourages it with resources like the Invention Studio. Furthermore, Georgia Tech has a well-built co-op program allows students to apply their knowledge. Beyond these opportunities to learn outside of class, I’m interested in Georgia Tech because of its computer science “threads” program.  The ‘devices’ subsection will allow me to work with my passions in computer hardware and software.

G TECH ESSAY 2:

Two years ago, I spent two weeks living with a host family in China. Due to a mix-up, I was told my host student wasn’t a boy, but a girl two years younger than me. I was already nervous about my speaking skills, and was now even more terrified. That first morning, we sat in awkward silence. At the end of breakfast, my host mother offered me a piece of durian fruit saying, what I interpreted as “it tastes very good”. Being a good guest, I ignored the fruit’s horrendous smell and took a bite. After I finished gagging, and my host family stopped giggling, I realized that I interpreted the mother correctly, but totally missed her sarcasm. As we drove to school, with my host blasting Rihanna, I realized that I would be just fine. My experience taught me that discomfort inspires growth and creates new opportunities to learn.