

The most important lesson I've learned from Bernice over the years is to never doubt yourself. If you stay true to what you believe in nothing can stop you. She also taught me that just because you're 96 doesn't mean your life is over. She is possibly the liveliest person I've ever met. She always told me "you're only old if you think you are." She has impacted my life in so many ways it's hard to imagine how I ever went through life without her. She inspires me to be a better person every day. She never gives up on me. She's one of my biggest supporters and when I hear her say "you're so smart Deeda (my nickname) you can do anything!" I really believe I can. I would highly encourage others to volunteer with the elderly if they don't have grandparents. It's amazing how much knowledge they hold. Have patience with them when they are forgetful, understand them when they feel misunderstood or lost. I wrote the following essay about Bernice to hopefully give you all a better insight on who and what she means to me...

My Perfect Stranger Has a Name

"Hey Bernice, what's a stranger?"

"I was a stranger; when I first came here, not now. You made me feel at home." I stare into her blue eyes and wonder how this could be. I'd never considered her being a stranger before.

A perfect stranger comes into your life and leaves an ever lasting impression. They come suddenly, and then all at once. They define life. It is from these unexpected moments that we learn the most from ourselves. They teach us who we are, our purpose. You think back on your life and imagine how you could ever have lived before without this person in your life. Where were they, where were you? I believe in moments of impact, moments that happen unexpectedly, moments that make you question your very being and everything you thought you were up to that point.

She came into my life six years ago and never once then did I think she would ever come to mean so much to me. When I first met her I just thought she was this cute little old lady who just needed someone to bring her groceries (she'd gotten too old to drive). She is more than that; she needed more than that too. I could see her aging right before my eyes; the life seemed to just fade away from her overnight. She was alone. Her husband had passed away from Alzheimer's five years before we met her and all her children seemed to be nonexistent. She needed love, attention, someone to care for her. My mom told me once "When you get to be her age, you'll be a kid again, and kids can't be left alone." She was right.

Three years came and went. Our life revolved around Bernice. We became her family. Our weekly visits turned into daily visits which then turned into sleepovers. It was a long three years. We had a plot twist in our lives the day she fell and broke her hip, she'd been home alone. Her invisible children suddenly popped up out of the unknown. They wanted to put her in a nursing home. Bernice cried. "I'll die if you put me in there." My mom knew she was right. She had seen it happen before to her beloved friend Viola. Her kids were going to do it regardless of how much Bernice pleaded.

We took her in.

As I sit here and think back on the years I am amazed to see how much I have grown because of her. This little old lady has taught me so much about life about who I am, who I aspire to be. Her ninety- six years of life come with experience, happiness, sorrow, passion and everything else in between. Those ninety- six years of hers have been well lived. I could sit for hours just listening to her talk about her tap dancing days, her adventures on the Marshal Islands near the Philippines, her protesting days when she used to write hearty articles to the Catholic Church or just anyone else who she disagreed with, the way her eyes get dreamy and her smile gets a little crooked when she talks about president Obama (she has quite the crush on him). I want to be able to argue, and let my voice be heard when I have a problem with something or someone, to see things from her perspective. I want to be stubborn just like her, to never settle. I want my life to be full of happiness. Being happy where I am and who I'm with.

She continues to age before our eyes. Her bones crack with every movement she makes. Yet every morning we wait for her to come out of her room with her nails polished, her pink lip stick smeared across her lips, her white hair combed behind her ears, and her smile spread widely across her face. She pushes her walker forward and straightens her back with a small little jolt that seems to take all of her strength. Shuffling forward she smiles, "Good Morning." She amazes me yet again every day. I stare at her in awe and hope that I grow to be as strong and full of life as she someday.

I sit here with her as I write this essay. I sit here and listen to her repeat herself time and time again.

"Deeda, who made this bread?" she asks.

"My mom did." I answer back.

"Oh." Her eyes open wide. "Sooooo goood." She stretches out her words.

I nod my head in agreement. She'll ask again in about five minutes and I'll remind her that my mom made the bread. She has a phrase she always says when she can't remember something. It's in Marshallese. I'll remind her yet again, and after some time she'll wonder "Did I already ask that?" I just smile at her, she already knows.

"Ijab milog alog- I forgot." She laughs.

