

It was the first time my sister and I were getting the chance to visit our Nana after her diagnosis of dementia. I was only ten years old, but my mom had tried to prepare me for the possibility that she would not recognize me. I entered her hospital room filled with fear and trepidation because my grandma on my dad's side had died just a year earlier; I did not want to lose this Nana too. During my visit, several doctors and nurses stopped in and for the most part, my grandma appeared to be her same jovial self. She told crazy jokes and even hit on a few of the male doctors. The only thing that was different was she continued to introduce me as her daughter instead of her granddaughter. As I was leaving, I told her that I was her granddaughter. Surprisingly, she chuckled and motioned for me to come close. My Nana whispered in my ear, "I know exactly who you are, but do you think I want these hot, young fellas to think I am old enough to have a granddaughter?" I left the hospital hopeful that dementia would not change the relationship between my grandma and me, but I could not have been more wrong.

The next three years brought about a rapid deterioration of Nana's memory and overall health; doctors identified my grandma's dementia more specifically as Alzheimer's. I found myself making up excuses to avoid going to my grandparents' house because it saddened me that she could not engage in a conversation without asking my name a half dozen times. What had happened to my Nana? Would she ever return or would I be left to reflect on days past with no hope of creating new, meaningful memories?

One Saturday afternoon, my dad had gone to Nana's house to replace their kitchen sink. He was nearly done when he slid out from underneath the sink to find my grandma standing above him, armed with a bat, ready to strike like Ken Griffey, Jr. with bases loaded. My dad is Mexican, but does not speak any Spanish, so communicating with my Panamanian grandmother was tricky. Something caused dad to find the words, "Soy tú hijo, Manuel." This stopped Nana

in her tracks and immediately she realized my dad was her son-in-law. Incidents like this were happening all too frequently and my parents began to worry that my grandma might become so confused and irritated that she resorted to violence with my sister and me.

In middle school, I began to do research on dementia; I was looking for a way to strengthen my bond with my Nana. I read studies that indicated that food and music could spark brilliant recollections of the past. I was a bit skeptical, but eager to see if grandma could be transported by music. I found her old Julio Iglesias vinyl albums and played them on the record player that I located in the garage. Before long, she was up and swaying to the rhythmic blends and singing in Spanish. It was magical! As I observed the dramatic change in my Nana, I considered other ways to ignite her memories. I began asking each of my uncles and my aunt what they remember about Nana from their childhood. All of them recanted stories of their time in Panama as young children with their mom and the tremendous adventures burned deeply in their minds. That got me thinking that perhaps I should travel to Panama and experience the culture, food, and atmosphere myself.

My family had vacationed in Mexico several times, so we were familiar with that part of our heritage, but we had never visited Panama. At my request, my parents agreed to arrange for a summer vacation in Panama City, Panama. From the moment we arrived in the airport, I sought to memorialize everything through pictures and videos. I created an itinerary for the trip, which included exploring Colón, my grandma's hometown. We went to the jungle, took a boat tour through the Panama Canal, ate all sorts of local cuisine, and traversed the Bridge of Americas. In my research of Panama, I learned that the Bridge of Americas was built in 1962, just a few years before my Nana came to the United States. It was the connection between the north and south American land masses. As I stood on the bridge looking out over the Panama

Canal, the beauty of the place my grandma once called home mesmerized me. In that moment, I felt more connected to her than ever before, and it was not just a blood connection, it was a heart connection. The remainder of the trip, I spent sampling foods like plantains, coconut rice with chickpeas, and peanut butter chicken molé. The flight home was bitter sweet, I reflected fondly on all I had seen and experienced, but I realized my grandma would never get the opportunity to return to the country she loved so much.

In the weeks after my trip, I pondered how I could bring Panama to my Nana. Fortunately, her eightieth birthday was just around the corner and the entire family had decided it was the perfect time to plan a reunion focused on Nana. I got busy putting together a scrapbook of mementos from Panama along with pictures that I had taken while there. Additionally, I bought several books that showed Panama then and now. My mom resurrected recipes for all of the foods Nana used to cook when she was growing up. I was a bit nervous that my plan to conjure up memories and emotions in my grandma could backfire, but our relationship had become almost non-existent; it was worth a try.

August 27th was a swelteringly hot day, but worthy of celebration to commemorate this milestone in my grandma's life. While I fully understand that there is no known cure for dementia, I was hopeful that my Nana would react favorably to the foods and pictures I gathered from my Panamanian experience.

Everyone was outside enjoying the barbeque and unusually hot weather, but my grandma was inside, so I decided to approach her with a plate of food and the books I had purchased and created for her. She was clearly in a state of confusion as she stared at me. I offered her a few plantains and she slowly nibbled on one, and within minutes, she was grabbing for more and gobbling them down as quickly as she could. I told her we had made her favorites, coconut rice

with chickpeas and peanut butter chicken môle. Her disorientation and irritation had subsided and before long, she offered me a seat next to her on the sofa. This was my opportunity to show her the scrapbook I had made from my trip. As she flipped through the book, a twinkle in her eye appeared that I had not seen in years. Nana began talking about her childhood as she recognized different places in the books. The family heard her talking and giggling, so one by one they entered the house as she reminisced and told stories of growing up in Cólón. Tears streamed down their faces as they listened; it was as though Nana had been transported back fifty years and the images she painted were as vivid as if it all happened yesterday. When she got to a picture of the Bridge of Americas, she suddenly stopped. After several minutes, she turned to all of us and said, “This is where my heart is,” and she pointed to the exact spot where I was standing at the time the picture was taken and without missing a beat, she looked at me and said, “Your heart is there too.” It was in that moment that I knew dementia had not taken the love that my Nana and I shared and that our hearts would be forever intertwined. I felt closer to her that day than in the days prior to dementia entering our lives.

I realized that Alzheimer’s could not take my grandma or our memories together, away from me. I am no longer fearful about spending time with her, I simply accept that some days are better than others, but each day is a blessing. Our relationship did change; it was strengthened because my eyes and heart were opened. Nana and I now have our special, nostalgic dates where we eat many Panamanian foods and flip through our scrapbooks while listening to Julio Iglesias. The Bridge of Americas ultimately helped build the Bridge of Hearts for my Nana and me, a bond that cannot be broken.