

BEFORE our session

“Honey, get the door because there’s someone I’d like you to meet.” Half asleep, I stumbled down the steep stairs as my mom called me. A tall, brown-haired old woman entered and my mind instantly shuffled through old times of me exploring our old family photo albums. We immediately connected; after ten years of living, I finally met my grandmother from Cyprus. In that moment, as I saw her face light up with every glance she gave me, I had this feeling that, somehow, both of our lives were about to transform for the better.

We began to learn more and more about each other each day as we conversed in Greek. We both shared a love for reading, writing, and, most importantly, a love for Cypriot grape leaves. Then one day, I realized that she would struggle living in the United States without knowing much English. So there I was, a ten-year-old little girl who set a goal in mind to teach my Yiayia English. It wasn’t going to be easy, but I was up for the challenge.

Sometimes it was interesting as I began to realize how similar Greek was to English. Every day I would teach my grandma basic expressions, and eventually she began reading and writing in English. “Good morning” and “How are you” I’d hear her softly say as she struggled with pronunciation. I felt this burst of satisfaction as I watched her progress, and I had come home from school, eager to teach her another expression for the day. I had set up my classroom in my basement: a small, reserved corner near my siblings’ toy area. Near “Monopoly” and “Twister” board games dispersed across the floor lay my sanctuary. Countless books, notebooks, pens and pencils, and “Ms. *****” stickers covered every individual workbook. Maps of the world and posters with helpful grammar techniques flooded the walls of the dense room.

Sometimes it was challenging when I didn’t know every Greek word to translate to English, and not being as skilled made me have some doubts in how my teaching would unfold. But although it would have taken more time, I kept telling myself to be patient. I just knew that somehow, with some more time, my grandma would be bilingual. So we studied together, from day to night multiple times, but I enjoyed every minute of it; it was a good kind of tired.

Then, one day as we were walking to the local market, I heard a woman asking the cashier, “Where can I purchase some meat?” I turned around and just witnessed my Yiayia speaking English in public for the very first time. I instantly cried tears of joy as I stood in awe of what had just occurred. I was unable to register the words that came out so loudly, so confidently, out of a woman who would shyly and softly speak English to me in the house only a few months back. To this day, she still shows me endless gratitude.

While teaching Greek to students at a local church of mine recently, I began to envision moments when I had taught English to my Yiayia. I was enjoying every minute just as I had nearly a decade ago. I felt so humbled to be able to revisit a part of myself of when I was genuinely satisfied with the impact I had managed to have on the woman who was, and still is, near and dear to me, and now to some new students of mine. As I developed a passion for teaching, my grandma unlocked a path to communicate her thoughts in a place she can now comfortably call her home.

AFTER our session

“Honey, get the door because there’s someone I’d like you to meet.” Half asleep, I stumbled down the steep stairs to the sound of my mother’s voice and came face to face with a woman that could’ve been me in fifty years.

We connected immediately. After ten years of looking at her in old family albums, I was finally meeting my grandmother from Cyprus. In that moment, as I saw her face light up with every glance she gave me, I had this feeling that, somehow, both of our lives were about to transform for the better.

We began to learn more and more about each other every day as we conversed in Greek. We shared a love for reading, writing, and, most importantly, a love for Cypriot grape leaves. During one of our conversations, I realized that she would struggle in the United States without knowing much English. So there I was, a ten-year-old little girl who set a goal to teach English to my Yiayia Penny. It wasn’t going to be easy, but I was up for the challenge.

I set up a classroom in my basement: a two-person desk in a small, corner near my siblings’ toy area. There were countless books, notebooks, pens and pencils strewn over the table. Stickers I’d made that said “Ms. [REDACTED]” covered every individual workbook. Maps of the world and posters with helpful grammar techniques flooded the walls of the dense room. Every day I would teach my grandma basic expressions, and eventually she began reading and writing in English. “Good morning,” and “How are you,” I’d hear her say softly as she struggled with pronunciation. I felt this burst of satisfaction as I watched her progress, and I came home from school, eager to teach her another expression for every day.

I doubted myself often. There were Greek words that I couldn’t translate exactly. I wondered how that would hinder her. I hoped I was patient and thorough and that she was learning instead of frustrated. But I persisted. I just knew that somehow, with some more time, my grandma would be bilingual. So we studied together, from day to night multiple times, but I enjoyed every minute of it; it was a good kind of tired.

One day as we were browsing through the local market, I heard a woman behind me ask a cashier slowly, but loudly in a thick Greek accent, “Where can I purchase some meat?” I instantly cried tears of joy as I stood in awe of what had just occurred. To this day, she still shows me endless gratitude.

While teaching Greek to students at a local church of mine recently, I began to envision moments when I taught English to my Yiayia. I was enjoying every minute just as I had nearly a decade ago. I felt so humbled to be able to revisit a part of myself when I was genuinely satisfied with the impact I had on a woman who had made such an impact on my life; a woman that bestowed all my mother’s wisdom upon her. As I introduced my Yiayia into a new world of English communication, I felt as though I was an adult who just successfully completed my first job; I knew I wanted to teach

for the rest of my life. While I developed a passion for teaching, my grandma unlocked a path to communicate her thoughts in a place she can now comfortably call her home. As I continue through life, I want to give all my students a chance to unlock a different path. Being an educator has become part of my identity, an aspect of me to hone and share. I want to pursue a career of assisting students in their pursuit of knowledge so they can experience their own moment of confidence just like my grandma.