

2026 Elie Wiesel Competition

2nd Place (Tie) Junior Essay

Ilah Hanger, 8th Grade

Cape Henry Collegiate, Jason DiGioia

My Grandfathers

My wonderful grandpa is a memory keeper. His words flow with exhilarating stories that drown me in deep thought every second that I am with him. When he tells a story of the past, like one of our many adventures, I can vaguely recall the feelings that I felt in that moment. He remembers things that others commonly forget. My grandpa went through many triumphs, losses, joyous times, and even life-threatening moments and seasons. He is never reticent to share what he and his loved ones journeyed through in hopes that his children and grandchildren will learn important lessons. I know that I absorb and cherish every word. He shows me through his stories that there is always more to learn and patience is key. Patience flows from him even with my never ending questions and I hope to someday treat my children the same way. Each story he tells is like a treasure to him that he is proud to show off. Every time he opens the treasure box, his eyes light up and bring nostalgia into the room. His memory telling never fails to amaze me, whether it is of his perilous climbs on the side of a mountain with my uncle, when he taught my mom to drive, or when we directed an entire choir together. He has no idea how much his words have an impact on me. For instance, when I came to the last concert that he directed before retiring, I got to experience being on the stage as well. When he talks about it, he recalls what I did and how proud he was. Every time he does this, I feel the same rush and thrill that the moment brought. It inspires me to make new ones and to share them with my future loved ones.

My other beloved grandfather was such a significant part of my family. Everyone looked up to him with admiration and awe. When he passed away, a hole seemed to take his place. His voice, eyes, and stories disappeared. I had to realize that just because he was gone, didn't mean that we should help close the blinds to him entirely. He gave light, so why should we extinguish it? I decided that instead of shutting him out in order to numb the pain, I would remember his wise words. I allowed myself to hang up pictures of him, talk about him, and think of him. It stung, but now I understand how worth it was. I can recall many of his stories and actions. He was a man who strived to put others before him and to love his family recklessly. I don't ever let the memories of him letting me fall asleep on his lap for hours slip my mind. I value what he taught me about putting others before myself. Through his responses to pain, he illustrated that no matter what is happening, you can always find joy, even if it is hidden in a crevice of the heart. All you have to do is search.