

2026 Elie Wiesel Competition

1st Place Senior Essay

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In My Family

In my family, the elders are more than just the oldest people in the room, they are the memory keepers. They hold our stories, traditions, and lessons, and they pass them down so we can understand the past and value it. Without them sharing these stories, our history could be forgotten. When I sit and listen to them talk, it feels like opening a book written over many years, filled with sacrifices, laughter, love, and lessons. They remind me that our family did not simply appear one day, we were built, piece by piece, through faith, hard work, and perseverance by the people who came before us.

The elders in my family inspire me to remember the past because they make it feel alive. When they tell stories, I can almost see what they saw and feel what they felt. I hear about times when life was harder, when money was tight, and when people relied on each other for survival. During those times, they often talk about trusting God, even when they did not know how problems would be solved. Their faith helped them stay strong when life felt uncertain. They do not tell these stories to complain, they tell them to teach. They want me to understand where I come from, so I never forget who I am. Because of them, the past becomes something I can carry with me instead of something that disappears.

One of the most important parts of our family's legacy is learning how to live close to the land. We still use home remedies and plant gardens, just like my great-grandmother and grandmother did. In my family, medicine does not always come from a store. Sometimes it comes from plants, roots, leaves, and herbs that God placed in the earth for healing. When someone has a cold, the elders know which herbs to boil for tea. When a stomach hurts, they know what roots to soak or what leaves to crush. When someone is tired or stressed, they know which plants can bring calm and rest. These remedies are not just treatments, they are knowledge passed down through generations, guided by faith and experience.

Gardening is not easy. The sun beats down, dirt settles under my fingernails, and my back aches from bending over. The air smells like soil and fresh leaves and sweat runs down my face as I pull weeds and water plants. But even when the work is hard, I feel proud. Watching tiny seeds turn into strong plants reminds me of the faith my elders had faith that with patience, care, prayer, and trust in God, growth would come. The garden teaches me responsibility and discipline, but it also teaches me gratitude for what God provides.

While we work, the elders talk. They explain which plants help with colds, which herbs calm the stomach, and how to tell when vegetables are ready just by looking at them. They also explain why we should thank God for every harvest, because nothing grows without His blessing. Their voices mix with the sounds of birds and rustling leaves. Many of these lessons have been passed down for generations.

The garden is not just a place where food grows, it is a classroom, a memory, and a connection to the past. It reminds me that knowledge, like faith and family, must be nurtured to survive.

One person whose history I want to preserve more than anyone else is my grandfather, who recently passed away. He was a U.S. Army veteran who fought in Vietnam and was wounded during his service. When he talked about the war, his voice was calm but serious. He never bragged or exaggerated; he spoke with honesty and quiet strength. I could see both pride and pain in his eyes. Through his experiences, he taught me the importance of faith, humility, and gratitude. He showed me that courage does not always mean being loud—sometimes it means enduring, trusting God, and continuing to love and care for your family even after hardship. His stories inspire me to carry forward the past, to honor the sacrifices of those who came before, and to live with purpose every day.

I want to preserve my grandfather's legacy by remembering his stories and living by the values he demonstrated. I want people to know that he served his country, faced danger, and still returned home to guide his family with wisdom and love. Thinking about him inspires me to work hard, stand up for what is right, and never take my family for granted. Even though he is gone, his history still lives in me and in the lessons, I share with others.

My grandmother is another elder whose legacy means a great deal to me. She has a secret recipe for homemade ice cream and snow cream that has been passed down through generations. Every winter, when snow covered the ground, she would bundle me up and tell me stories while we collected fresh snow. The cold air stung my skin, and my hands grew numb, but I didn't mind because I knew what was coming next. Inside, the kitchen felt warm and smelled sweet. When it was time to add the secret ingredient, she would smile and tell me to turn around. She always said, *"When you're old enough to cook, I'll tell you."* That mystery made the tradition feel even more special because it showed me that some traditions are meant to be earned and protected.

My grandmother was also an English teacher, and her love for words shaped me in ways I will never forget. She always used big words when she spoke, and if I asked her what one meant, she would hand me a dictionary and tell me to look it up myself. At first, I found it frustrating, but I learned to appreciate her approach. She taught me that knowledge is something you search for, not just receive, and that language carries the power to connect generations and preserve stories. That same care and attention she gave to words is reflected in everything she does from teaching lessons to creating traditions that last.