REFLECTIONS

The Grandma Fund

Twenty years ago, when I graduated from medical school, my grandmother, who was then 74, widowed, and working as a bookkeeper in Manhattan, gave me \$200. It seemed at the time like a lot of money for her to be giving me; I wanted to do something worthwhile with it.

I remembered my physics teacher in college, Dr. Weinstock. He took many of us out to lunch with money from the "Lunch Fund" (in fact it was money from his own pocket). When we returned years later and asked to take him out to lunch, he replied, "No, you're supposed to take someone *else* out to lunch." In other words, pass it on.

So I created the "Grandma Fund." The fund was designed to do some good for others. As an intern in the Bronx, I would buy bagels for the nurses, textbooks for my medical students, and flowers for the patients. I remember buying transistor radio batteries for a blind patient with end-stage renal disease who wanted to listen to what was happening in New York City during the blackout of 1977.

I kept a list of all the things the Grandma Fund did on a long white piece of cardboard from the cleaners on Jerome Avenue, and would read aloud from the list every year when we gathered for my grandmother's birthday. It would bring her such joy.

But eventually the money ran out (this was New York City, you know). Grandma liked the idea so much she started sending me a check for \$25 each month. And for 20 years, every month, the check would arrive in an envelope, inscribed with my grandmother's inimitable handwriting, always with a note, "I hate putting a check in an envelope without a few words to go with it."

I'd spend the money on food for the housestaff, books for learners, treats for my colleagues, anyone who seemed to need a little uplifting. Over the course of 20 years, I suspect there were hundreds of students and colleagues who benefitted from the fund. In return, I would occasionally ask that they send a small card to my grandmother, saying thanks.

She really appreciated those thank-you notes. She would read them over the phone to my whole family. Everyone seemed to feel a little better when Grandma called with a new note from "the doctors."

Grandma suffered through a variety of illnesses over the ensuing years, but she never missed a check. Two years ago, she was hospitalized with baffling spells of unresponsiveness. After a crescendo of these episodes, she suffered one that lasted for over 8 hours. We all feared that she was dying. The next morning she miraculously awoke, left the hospital, and sent me a check the next day. The note read, "Sorry this is late. I was unavoidably delayed."

The last year was hard for my grandmother. She still lived alone, independently in Queens, supported in her daily activities by a neighbor, Diane. But she couldn't walk her 2 miles a day as she liked (she retired from the bookkeeping business at age 82), and her notes would read, "I am getting old and weaker and it is harder and harder for me . . . but I will always remember the doctors. Here is the check."

Students were always particularly moved when I would tell them the story of the Grandma Fund. Just last month I had the privilege of mentoring a group of third-year medical students. The Grandma Fund was in full gear (although the glazed donuts on rounds had been replaced in this cholesterol-conscious world with oat bran muffins and skim milk). At the end of the month, they wrote her a thank-you card. But this group was different. They wrote me a thank-you card as well, and in it said, "Thank you for your teaching, but most of all, thank Grandma!" A month later, they were still writing her. One of them sent her a book, entitled *Life with Mother*. It was as if they did not want their connection with her to end.

Perhaps they knew something. Two weeks later, my grandmother suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage and died shortly thereafter. I attended her funeral, and told this story. It was hard to say goodbye to such a remarkable woman who had affected so many people in her later years, someone who had shared her love with so many.

I returned home from the funeral this morning, to find a last check waiting for me. She had written and stamped it only hours before she died. The letter said, "Dear Mark, I am very happy to keep up the fund. The notes I get from the doctors are dear to read . . . As I say, it is not easy (being 94), but at least it is rewarding too. My very best to you all."

I'll close with the inscription from the book that my students were kind enough to send my grandmother just a few weeks ago. The words are very beautiful: "For Mrs. Lena Linzer (Grandmother of Dr. Mark Linzer): Thank you for all the generosity in feeding medical students across the country. Your kindness enriches us so that we may be better doctors and better human beings. This book commemorates mothers, and in a sense you have been a fairy godmother for all the medical students who have enjoyed your love. Bless you."

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This work is adapted from a eulogy read by the author at the funeral of his grandmother in Flushing, N.Y., April 23, 1997.