Naomi Tsai

In a way, my childhood was a normal childhood. Family of four: counting two parents and a younger brother, living in a small white house with a red roof. I attended the local elementary school, and everyday I’d go on the tire swing during lunch. My family was never extremely poor or extremely wealthy, we managed to get by pretty well. There were, of course, some aspects that stood out in my childhood. Most children don’t have memories of going to the Chinese supermarket and helping their father purchase veggies. Or memories of spending hours at a family friend’s house that was as silent as an empty, cold, auditorium. Or memories of blinking, flashing, video calling machines attached to the television. I have the unusual experience of having a deaf parent.

My dad went deaf at a young age. He can read and write Taiwanese, but his English is extremely limited. He grew up in a rural, countryside part of Taiwan, and his family was always very poor. Getting enough food to eat was hard, and oftentimes dinner consisted of rotten fish or garbage pickings. In her lifetime, his mother gave birth to ten children, five of whom died within a year of being born. When my dad was a child, he contracted some sort of fever, but his family couldn’t afford to pay for medication to help him get better. My dad has been deaf ever since.

Throughout his life, my dad has never let his lack of hearing or speaking hold him back. While he wasn’t able to finish high school, my dad found a mentor who taught him everything he needed to know to work as a dental technician. Years later, after he met my mother and they were married, he became the first and only member of his family to move to the United States. I’ve gone back to Taiwan with my family to visit our relatives there, but I never got the chance to meet my grandparents; both had died before my parents were married.
When I was in middle school, I came up with the idea of taking some sign language classes with my dad at the local community college. Together we went twice a week, and while it was mostly things I already knew, I got to meet a separate side of my father. The communication barrier in our family has always been a challenge. It can be unbelievably hard to connect. The first language I actually learned to communicate with was sign language, but because of school and other activities, I can’t keep up sign like I would’ve liked. Sometimes I feel as if my dad and I have never had a real conversation. I know I will never have the classic “daddy’s girl” relationship with my father. I do know however, that we’ve gone through and bonded over something stronger than most families experience. No matter what, my father always comes to my band concerts and school speeches. Even though he can’t truly experience the things I’m performing, I know he is proud of me anyways.

My dad is one of my biggest inspirations. This year, my friend and I started an American Sign Language club at our school. The motivation for me was to work on my sign language, but to also inspire others to learn. I plan on studying sign language after high school. I want to eventually become fluent. While communicating with my dad isn’t easy, it is something that will always be important to me. A disability may seem like something no one would ever want, but in some ways, it can be a blessing in disguise. My father has taught me to be thankful for what I have. Even just graduating high school is something my dad never did. I am incredibly lucky to have the opportunities and abilities that I do. I have a special perspective on life that most teenagers won’t ever have.