

## My Grandma's "Christmas Program"

By

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Each year my grandma makes my family and I perform in a "Christmas Program." It is one of the many family traditions that have been around as long as I can remember; one that I have loved, hated, and grown to love again. However quirky the activities my grandma plans may be, they are the foundation my family is built on as well as the nails that hold us together. Without my grandma always nagging us to join in and play along with her whimsical traditions, our family get-togethers would be a drag. The family would not make such an effort to spend time together, especially in the busy Holiday season. But with the "Christmas Program" in place we have no choice.

It is the same with each December that passes. With the graceful authority of the oldest member of a family, my grandma gathers the whole family, eight adults and seven grandchildren, to sit around her cozy living room. The big brick fireplace, compete with a roaring Yuletide blaze and decorated mantel – covered in fresh evergreen, Christmas angels, and cinnamon scented candles – serves as the backdrop for the production. There is hardly space to walk in the room, what with all the packages, wrapping paper, and food. Trays fill the table; cheese and crackers, sausages, nuts, and an endless array of cookies. My grandma is always cooking too much for us.

The program starts with my cousin Levi as the Master of Ceremonies. He addresses the crowd, using an old brush or a dog bone as a microphone and introduces each of the acts. My grandma requires all of the grandchildren to have an act. No one knows what the consequence of not performing would be because no one has ever tried. In my family you do what you are told

and that is all there is to it. I oftentimes sing, being it is probably my only so-called talent, but there is also dancing, story telling, skit performing, poem reciting, piano playing, and the occasional joke telling.

No matter what the act, my grandma is thrilled with the performance. She always sits in her wing back chair, wearing one of her winter sweaters, featuring House Finches or Cardinals, sitting on the branches of an evergreen heavy with snow. Her eyes are soft behind her large silver framed glasses and her smile extenuates the wrinkles around her mouth. Her silver hair had recently had a permanent and it is sitting perfectly in the only style I can ever remember seeing her wear.

If we are very lucky, at the end of the program one of the grandchildren will be able to coax grandma into singing one final carol. She will walk over to the piano, pretending to be modest, saying “Oh I don’t know if I remember this one,” or “But my voice isn’t warmed up.” As one of the other adults or grandchildren plays piano for her, my grandma sings a slow carol in her beautiful soprano voice. It carries hauntingly through the room and we all sink into the music. We sink beyond our busy everyday lives, beyond the stress of school and work and home life. My grandma has this effect on people, not just when she sings but whenever we are with her. She is the peacekeeper, the serenity deliverer, and the comforting old quilt that our entire family wraps itself in anytime one of us has a problem.

As a child, and particularly a preteen, I never thought much of my grandma’s “Christmas Program.” It was a hassle. I always had other things I would rather be doing than arranging some silly performance for a big ol’ family talent show. The whole thing seemed meaningless, corny. But my grandma and her “Christmas Program” have been so much more than that to me and to my whole extended family. This program and all of our other silly traditions are why we

all still get together as a family. My grandma has continuously brought us together for events like the “Christmas Program,” and I wouldn’t trade those times with my family for the world.

I remember laughing with my cousin Marshall when he was only five years old and did a Jesus rap for the program. There was the year my cousin Levi and I worked for a whole month trying to train my dog Max to do tricks for the program, he never did do any tricks but my cousin and I sure were close after that month. My cousin Emily always plays the most beautiful piano solos and the “Christmas Program” is virtually the only time anyone in the family gets to hear her play. And the first year that my little brother, Reid, learned to read, I can remember how my mom, dad, and I practiced with him each night. He was planning to read a part of The Grinch Who Stole Christmas, by Dr Seuss, and he was so nervous. That Christmas Reid sat in front of the fire place and carefully pronounced each of the well rehearsed words. I was so proud of my baby brother, I was sure he was the smartest kid in the world.

Another year, not to long ago, I sang, “My Grown up Christmas List,” by Amy Grant. I hadn’t practiced very hard and I was nervous, even though it was just my family. I remember mixing up the words on some of the verses, but no one seemed to mind. My family listened intently and some of my cousins sang along toward the end. At the end I saw my grandma take out one of her hand embroidered handkerchiefs to wipe her eyes; she was crying.

The “Christmas Program” is not the only family tradition that my grandma started. At each family meal, you can anticipate that my grandma will have a special “question” for the occasion. About half way through the meal after a certain amount of suspicion has been aroused, she will clear her throat to get the total attention of our often loud and large family. She stands and with extreme dignity and the utmost seriousness asks some silly conversation starter like “If you could have one person, dead or alive, come to dinner, who would it be?” These questions

often degenerate into the kind of jocular conversation common to our family but my grandma does not mind. She likes it when one of the funnier family members or smaller grandchildren come up with comical or sarcastic answers. She is usually one of the first to laugh out loud.

Our summer holidays at my grandma's house are often less structured, with less rigid traditions. In the warm weather, traditions include eating big meals picnic style down by the lake, and playing spoons out on the porch where a cool wind can blow through. In the summer at get-togethers my grandma can be found having watermelon seed spitting contests with the grandkids or making us all laugh by showing off her funny face – which involves sticking several fingers the corners of her mouth eyes and nose and pulling everything outwards. But whatever we do in the winter or the summer, my grandma makes sure that the whole family is together as much as possible with all of our busy schedules.

My grandma has taught me the importance of having a close knit family and how wonderful traditions can be. They do not need to be fancy, or elegant, or even cool. They just need to be something you can have fun doing together, something that will continue to bring you and your loved ones back together year after year so that you never grow apart. I hate to even think about where my family might be if it was not for my grandma, and the work she did to keep us all together.