

Family

Remembrance Day in an elementary school is an amazing experience. The little kids have no real concept of what it's all about, but they take everything so seriously, and do such a good job with their posters and poems that you have to wonder what's going through their minds. They've never experienced war, and probably have never lost loved ones in an overseas conflict. They can't really understand, can they?

That's what I thought, until I met Tessa.

A first-year teacher in a small northern school, I teach mostly grade four kids. They're fun, and full of enthusiasm. I took advantage of their eagerness to learn after our Remembrance Day ceremonies wrapped up; when we'd trooped back to the classroom and had a much-needed bathroom break, I began the Social Studies lesson by asking them what the ceremony had been about.

I didn't really expect them to know much about war and hardship, or about how devastating the two World Wars had been for many communities, and I wasn't wrong. They really had no idea of what it was like.

Except for Tessa.

"Mr. Foster, why do you think Germany started World War Two?" she asked me a few minutes after class had started.

"Well, Tessa, there were a lot of reasons ..."

"Do you think Hitler was really evil? And is it true that the German soldiers were really well trained? How come the United States took so long to join the war?"

The questions just came pouring out of her. And they were good questions, too. Astonishing questions, from a grade four student.

"Tessa, how come you know so much about World War Two?"

"My grampy was in the war. He did all sorts of things. He even parachuted from a plane once."

I was intrigued. "How much do you know about what your grandfather did in the war, Tessa?"

"Oh, I know all kinds of things. He joined the army when he was seventeen, and they sent him to France. He was in a lot of battles. And he helped free some towns and villages there. I'm really proud of my grampy!"

"You should be, Tessa. He sounds like he was very brave!"

Over the next few weeks I talked to Tessa a lot about her 'grampy'. She told me all about his family, and how he'd been gone for almost three years during the war. She explained how he had tried to write letters home every week, but that many of them had never arrived.

"Grampy was really proud of the things he did in the war", Tessa told me one day. "He had to shoot a lot of people, but he helped people too. Once, he and his friends saved some kids in a school that had been bombed."

Tessa's grandfather must have some interesting stories to tell, I thought, as I listened to her talk about how happy her 'grammy' had been when Tessa's grandfather had returned, after the war was over. I was looking forward to meeting him, and I hoped to convince him to come into our classroom to talk about his experiences. But he must be pretty old by now.

"Mr. Foster, why did the Nazis hate Jewish people so much? Benny is Jewish, and nobody hates him! He's nice!"

Benny is a student in our class. I was about to try to explain, but Tessa kept talking.

"Grampy always talked about how glad he was that we went over there and helped stop the bad things from happening. He cried a lot when he got home."

Tessa's grandfather sounded like an amazing man. More and more, I was looking forward to meeting him. It was obvious that Tessa loved him very much.

"Tessa, did anyone else in your family fight in the war?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Foster. Both of grampy's brothers were in the war. In Italy. One of them nearly died once in an explosion. But they all came back safe. Grampy always said that they'd been lucky, but that he was glad they'd gone."

Tessa brought me photos of her grandfather, and told me all about them. "That's grampy when he was in Paris" she said, describing one incredibly moving photo that depicted her grandfather being hugged by several old men. "They were really happy that Canadians had come to help free them from the Nazis."

Another photo depicted her grandfather in his full uniform. There were a lot of medals pinned to his chest. Tessa told me about each one ... what they meant, and what her grandfather had done to earn them. "He didn't really like wearing all the medals", Tessa informed me. "He thought that he'd just done what people expected him to do, and shouldn't have got medals for it."

"Your grandmother must have been very proud of him" I told Tessa.

“She really was. But she cried a lot when he was gone for so long. She really loved grampy.”

It was a week or so later when I got to meet Tessa’s mother. I sat down with her to talk to her about Tessa.

“Your daughter really knows a lot about the war” I began. “Her knowledge has really astonished me. Her grandfather sounds like an amazing man. I’d like to meet him sometime. But he must be pretty old by now. Does he still get around?”

“Oh, Mr. Foster” she laughed, “Tessa calls him ‘grampy’, but he was really her great grandfather. He died a few years after the war ended, and his wife died a year later.”

“But ... Tessa has been telling me all about what he did in the war, and all about your family ... I assumed ...”

“Mr. Foster, we’re really proud of ‘grampy’ and what he and his brothers did in the war. His oldest son was my father, who told me all about grampy and what he had done. My father talked about him a lot; he wanted me to know what a wonderful man he had been. I’ve passed all that knowledge on to Tessa. I think it’s important for her to know about her family, especially since it’s just Tessa and my brother left now.”

“Tessa talks about him as if he were still at home, telling stories.”

“She does, doesn’t she! I’m glad. I wanted her to feel close to her ‘grampy’, even though she never met him. Did she tell you about her uncle?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“My brother is in the Canadian Armed Forces, and just returned from Afghanistan. We wanted Tessa to know what her great grandfather had done, so she could appreciate what her uncle has been through.”

I said goodbye to Tessa’s mother then, and sat down in my desk. I wondered about the love in Tessa’s family; a love that could keep memories of a past generation alive so strongly.

Tessa will cherish the memories of a ‘grampy’ she never knew for the rest of her life. I wonder if she’ll tell her own kids about him, some day. I hope so.