

Meagan Ayres

WR115

Author's Note: I'm hoping one day to work in the Mental Health and Human Services Field. I've always struggled with writing; getting my thoughts on paper has never been easy for me. I chose to write about my uncle for this paper because I've heard that you should write about something you know and are passionate about.

David

David, the fifth of eight children, was different from his siblings in many ways. He was the sole red-head of the family, he was brilliant and he was a free, yet troubled spirit. Even though my uncle was a funny and captivating man, he never quite felt comfortable living a so-called normal life. By his early 30's my uncle had chosen the incredibly hard life of living on the streets and riding the rails.

I believe this decision was prompted by his desire to drink. My uncle had his own secret demons that he was not able to or did not know how to deal with while he was sober. Like so many other people, the only escape he could find was through a bottle. Sadly, there are no benefits from long-term drinking; it led my uncle down an unpredictable path, eventually isolating him from loved ones. David's behavior had become so erratic and unpredictable that he was no longer welcome at my grandparents' house.

The following years were tumultuous; it was very sporadic when we would get to see David. Sometimes he would go to my grandmother's house to pick up mail; other times sometimes someone would accidentally bump into him out somewhere. Even those accidental meetings were hard -- I ran into my uncle once and he didn't recognize me because I had grown up. He still pictured me as a little girl.

My uncle suffered many tragedies while living on the streets and he developed many medical conditions because of it. Every so often David would be hospitalized for a procedure or treatment which forced him to be sober. These were brief glimmers of hope; for those few days he was Uncle David again. He was still as sharp and as funny as he'd ever been. Unfortunately, it always ended the same: after a few days my uncle would disappear again and return to the street.

I don't think anyone was shocked when we got the news that my uncle had passed away. Honestly I think we were more surprised that it hadn't happened sooner, considering some of the horrific events he went through while on the streets. However, we were all very sad and slightly relieved that at least we knew what happened to him. We held a private ceremony atop a hill in Springfield that holds special memories for my family. We said goodbye to our beloved David and we tossed his ashes into the wind, setting his spirit free forever. This was followed by an open memorial service.

My grandmother had been asked by some volunteers at a shelter my uncle frequented if they could attend his memorial service. They also asked if the family would be okay if some of David's friends from the street came to say their goodbyes. Touched, my grandmother readily agreed and organized the memorial at a little park across the street from the shelter. We were surprised at how many people showed up, but it was what they had to say that really blew us away. Each one of them took turns remembering David and what he meant to them, what he had done for them and how he had added a little something special to their lives. After hearing everything that these people had to say, there was this sense of relief and gratitude that settled over my family. David had not spent all these years on the streets alone; he had been surrounded by people who gave a damn about him. Knowing that these people were able to look past my uncle's dirty, smelly exterior and see the intelligent and caring man he was, changed how I saw people.

So many people end up in the same situation as my uncle, each one with their own tragic tale about how they got there. Sometimes it's due to their choices and sometimes it's out of their control. Regardless of how or why these people came to be homeless they are not disposable, they do not deserve to be swept aside to be forgotten or left behind, they are worth fighting for. So many of these forgotten people still have a lot to offer and can still touch other people's lives. I'm sorry that my uncle was not able to find that solace with his own family, but I am forever grateful that he was able to find it with someone. I hope that one day I'm able to offer another that same sort of relief by reaching out and helping someone they love.

Instructor's Note: In WR115, when we approach narrative essays, we talk about how important telling stories is in our lives and in our communities. More specifically to the practice of essay writing, we talk about how a writer can use a story to make a point, to

educate, illuminate, enlighten. Meagan's essay did that and more, as its emotional appeal brought down the house.

--Lidia Yuknavitch