
Life Lessons Learned Along the Way: Grandpa Stories and The Big Picture

We continue our series of personal, impactful stories that have shaped how we practice law.

By Richard M. Mitchell

It was a small family and I had no siblings. Maybe that made me more appreciative of what I did have, especially my grandfather. He was my hero growing up, and still is to this day. He was fiercely independent with tremendous natural instincts.

As a very young man, he left his home in Austria with his brother just before World War I, knowing that he likely would not see the rest of his family again. He was right. I cannot imagine the inner strength it took to make that decision, but he was determined to find a better life and avoid one ravaged by war, always looking at the big picture. He landed in Canada and began working with the Canadian Pacific Railroad, but he aspired to so much more.

I remember him telling me as a child how he got his start in business. When he arrived in this country, he was keenly aware that he would always need food and shelter before he could do anything else, so he got a job in a restaurant. He was careful with his money, and eventually bought that restaurant. For a man with virtually no formal education, his instincts got him farther than most people. He made some good decisions that put him in a fortunate position by the time the depression came. While the country was crashing and burning, he and his partner, George, were two of the only people around with cash. They used that cash to buy additional restaurants. Those restaurants put my mother and aunt through school and provided a very good life for his family.

Of course, he did all this before I was around to meet him. He used to tell me stories about his younger days, which I passed on to my own kids. At night, my

son, in particular, used to ask me to tell him “grandpa stories.” I gladly obliged.

Perhaps because he was deprived of the chance to watch his own parents grow old, he made sure that the family he raised kept its feet on the ground. When I was growing up, one of the things we always did at holidays and birthdays was play board or card games. I think that was grandpa’s idea of sitting around the dinner table making sure everybody talked to each other. It worked. I remember learning a lot about my grandpa, and my parents, by rolling dice on a board or pulling four of a kind from a deck of cards. It was not until I had a few years behind me that I realized just how good a card player grandpa really was.

Those lessons from the “grandpa stories” have been invaluable to me in raising my own children and in my practice. I realize how much harder it would have been for me to see the big picture without his influence. It is easy to get lost in everyday minutia. The big things, the important things, however, are always there whether you see them or not. The struggle is making sure that you really, truly do see them. I try to keep that in mind when solving my clients’ problems and facing all the other details that come along in life. That was the way grandpa did it, so it must be right.