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## Don't Worry: A Personal Documentary of My Grandmother and an Exploration of Themes of Motherhood, Loneliness, and Later Life

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DON'T WORRY: A PERSONAL DOCUMENTARY OF MY  
GRANDMOTHER AND AN EXPLORATION OF THEMES OF  
MOTHERHOOD, LONELINESS, AND LATER LIFE

BY

OLIVIA WILSON

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE HONORS IN THE MAJOR  
PROGRAM IN FILM PRODUCTION IN THE COLLEGE OF  
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THESIS CHAIR: ELIZABETH DANKER, M.F.A, M.A.

## Abstract

The intent for this thesis is to explore the ideologies of my grandmother and to learn from them. I do so by filming and editing a personal documentary with Grandma serving as my subject. She is a woman who has been very present in my life and who has lived and bestowed so much upon me, yet I still remain wanting more. I wish to know much more of her mind now than I did as a child of simpler times and ponderings. I have researched the psychology of older women as a means to come to an even clearer understanding of Grandma, as well. There is perhaps an unconscious ignorance about women of older age: being that women are seen as child bearers who are valued less later in their lives. My grandmother never had children of her own; she is my father's stepmother. Examining her maternal nature has brought about the question of the very definition of motherhood and how she has exhibited this through her assistance in raising my sisters and I.

Dedication

For Grandma

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## Introduction

Older women tend to be neglected in American society. Their age distresses their youthful appearances and physical abilities, and as a result, they are cast aside. Many women experience a change in personality in response to the physical changes they go through, especially when one is left widowed (which is more typical for women than men, due to variance in life expectancy correlating with gender). A Women's Studies researcher and professor, Nancy Datan, noted in her experience teaching adult development courses that many of the young women are neglectful, and perhaps in denial, of their inherent destiny of becoming widows later in life. She surveyed middle-aged women in her class, asking if they plan to marry, and then asked those with their hands raised if they planned on being widowed for fifteen years of their life. "The hands [dropped]" (Datan 14) and those young women were paralleled with the majority of women in their ignorance of the "grim statistics of later life" (Datan 14). My grandmother is a widow, but most importantly, a woman I have chosen not to neglect. This thesis research is accompanied by an experimental, personal documentary about Grandma (my grandmother). The research, along with my creative project, is centered around my grandmother and being open to what she has to impart upon me, as well as how these later stages of her life have impacted the wisdom and words she relays. There is mystery in the tacit wisdom that older women carry with them, which most people do not bother to investigate. They are accustomed to the passive state of the older women closest to them, since that is how the gender is conditioned to be. The neglect of this demographic of society seeps into the study of social psychology. Few studies have been conducted involving older women in the social psychological research realm. Age is a factor that sociology professor Anne E. Barrett argues is "typically neglected in discussions of self and identity in mainstream social psychology" (Barrett 331). I attempt to give attention to this often ignored demographic by making an experimental, personal documentary about

my grandmother. This paper will address the creative process and all of the personal feelings and associations that are a part of that.

## Who Is Grandma?

Grandma is a woman of words. She is someone who does not believe in silence, because she is always listening out for something. The crickets of the surrounding woods, people laughing, or the sound of a nearby body of water. This is the original reason I sought out to document her. Karen Elizabeth Rafalko-Wilson is a woman of 66 years of age, with more than twenty years of service in the U.S. Navy as a Captain in the Nurse Corps. She will tell you no matter how many times you've heard it that her greatest accomplishment is being the grandmother to my two sisters and I, though. I come from a set of triplets, and we were raised for much of our childhood by Karen, who I will refer to here on out as Grandma. A huge factor in this research surpasses the yearning to learn more of Grandma, but rather to ascertain the formation of a natural maternal figure. Grandma never had children of her own; she considers us the closest thing she's ever had to children, and I certainly consider her a mother in my life.

Grandma is a woman who will speak openly about a good bit, but there are questions with answers that are a bit harder to pry out. The question asked of many women in this society, still even today, is that of, "Children or no children?" I constantly care for people, even where it is unwanted. I want to be a mother. This is my primary goal in life. I hope to find a balance between work and motherhood, which is why I look to Grandma for guidance. Grandma would constantly say to me from when I was very young that I needed to "be a kid" and "don't worry." She continues to tell me this to this day, even though I am now a twenty-three year old adult woman. Grandma certainly wanted me to listen to her words rather than to replicate her actions, but her actions were much more impressionable upon me. She is someone who is constantly looking out for others and genuinely cares. I continue to model these behaviors after her, and she



continues to tell me to relax, but with much less effort these days, as she has become aware of our similarities over the years.

This is what has led me to document her in her home in the Outer Banks, North Carolina; the home she seeks solitude in for the Summer and Fall of each year.

She has always been a caretaker in my eyes, of every living thing in sight. Before grandchildren, she had her younger siblings to care for, and later on plenty of dogs. In her generation, she was raised learning the duties of a wife and a mother from her own mother but was also encouraged by her parents to be strong-willed and educated. She embodies this balance of maternal devotion, along with individual liberty -- she always has. As her age increases, though, her independence (at least physically) has diminished due to her inaccessibility from chronic pain and an increasingly frail body. Many women of older age are, resistant to influence, but simultaneously self-conscious of the impact their chronic conditions and altered physical appearance has on others' perceptions. A very common emotion resulting from this is embarrassment. In spite of her physical decline, this description is exactly the attitude my Grandma has chosen to adopt: "Despite their obvious and stated dismay, the women described how they had achieved a sense of acceptance, if not serenity" (Clarke and Bennett 349).

## Influences and Exploration

My documentary is an exploration of my grandmother who comes from a hardworking background, along with an inherited maternal background, (never bearing children of her own, but rather marrying into a family where she was eventually granted grandchildren). The documentary serves as a pursuit to understand precisely who she is and how some of her personality might have been passed on to her grandchildren, including myself. This is ventured through means of documentary, as well as more experimental conventions. These methods capture her essence and how she defies society's demands for her silence. This is somewhat typical for older individuals, as researcher Rosemary Hopcroft completed a study exploring a concept called "resistance to influence." Among younger and older individuals of both genders, Hopcroft concluded "older individuals were more resistant to influence on average than younger individuals" (Hopcroft 361). This correlates to the nature that seems to inhabit my Grandma now, resistance rising along with her age.

Two documentaries have influenced what this documentary has become so far, both very personal ones to the respective filmmakers. Both *Nobody's Business* and *Stories We Tell* foreground the filmmaker and their relationship with each of the subjects. These works explore family and the estranged nature of them, as well.

Alan Berliner's *Nobody's Business* is a personal documentary on Berliner's father and his ancestry. The most impactful trait of this film is how raw and authentic the interviews with his father are. Berliner's voice is most often present in the interview set up whereas most interviews cut out the actual questioning of the subject. Berliner's inclusion of his own voice and the banter and bickering that occur between his father and him really solidify the type of relationship that

he and his father share, therefore making the rest of the documentary believable and reliable, since the vulnerability is laid out.

The forward nature and Berliner's presence in the film is really what intrigued me as far as drawing inspiration for my own interview process of my grandmother. This is set up right from the beginning of the film and is a persistent practice throughout the duration of it. Berliner's relationship and therefore banter with his father are much more aggressive than mine and my grandmother's, but the filmmaker's presence and obvious drawing out of specific ideas of his father are what I sought out to replicate in my own work. Specifically, within the first scene of the film, Berliner asks his father about an old black and white photograph of his posing behind a microphone. He asks for the story behind it and his father replies very brashly with, "You want me to make up stories?" His father then follows up with a statement of just how ordinary and plain his life is. This idea is something that ensues many arguments in most of the film's interviews with his father. When I first approached my grandmother about making my own film about her and our unique relationship, she claimed the exact same thing, "Why would you want to make a movie about me? I'm just Grandma." This film's very natural and uncut representation of familial relationship is exactly what I hope to implement into my own.

Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* is a documentary that centers on trying to figure out the questionable past of her deceased mother. Just as Berliner's documentary, she allows for her presence in the film, especially during the interviews. The film cuts seamlessly between old home-film footage, modern day captured b-roll, and the interviews. This film has guided more of my direction in the post-production process of my own documentary, since I have quite a bit of home videos that I am attempting to utilize.

Polley allows for the majority of her film to be home movie footage (some reenacted, some authentic) which really grants the audience an authentic perspective of her mother. Even with the reenacted home movie footage, Polley was directing it. This film is her perspective and hers alone on the situation of discovering exactly who her deceased mother was. This is exactly what I want of *Don't Worry*. I want people to know who my grandmother is to me and the uniqueness I see in our relationship.

## Creative Process

As far as the process of documentation, I was initially unsure of what I wanted to convey or uncover with it. I thought of shooting a simple portrait of her as an independent older woman living among nature and being content with it, perhaps exploring the idea of isolation that seems to pervade the later years of women. I soon realized that there was much more to unearth about Grandma. I have much to soak up from her words that she has shared with me over the years, and especially now; now that we are both adults who can talk about more abstract topics that were less tangible to a younger version of myself. Especially now that my Grandma doesn't have her husband, she will talk to me for hours if I'm able to allow her the time. Once a woman experiences spousal bereavement, she is more likely to reach out and take hold of a child to cope and deal with the tragedy. Grandma has me along with my two sisters as daughters; we're the closest things to it. She regularly calls each of us to chat about topics ranging from surface-level small talk to deeper thought-provoking ideas. Pai and Ha took it upon themselves to research the "factors that influence the link between widowhood and social relationships" (Pai & Ha 494). They name five traits of personality that have a huge impact on these relationships, which are "Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability (the trait opposite to Neuroticism), and Openness to Experience" (Pai & Ha 494). These traits in question contribute to a decent amount of the questions I prompt my grandmother through interviewing in my documentary.

In preparation for this project, I wanted to exercise my documentary filmmaking, since I had never formally made one. I decided to shoot a portrait piece of my good friend and colleague Trevon. He is someone I have worked quite a bit with on our peers' films and on my own, so there was a bit of background and comfortability already present. He is a filmmaker as well as a brilliant studio artist with a focus on drawing and painting. I wanted to see what more I could learn from him from just being present as he was working on his craft. I left him basically unaffected by the presence of my DSLR camera and I

as I quietly shot his process of his creative endeavors. The film ended up centralizing around this theme of process. This was a project that I had not scripted and known at least a semblance of what the final product would be. I just gathered as much footage as I could and then leapt into arranging all of it into a film I hadn't predicted it to be. Assembling the final product left me with a great amount of knowledge and confidence in the incoming pursuit of this documentary about my grandmother. I now had under my belt a film that arose from flexibility, adaptability, and openness to the idea of not having an idea of what your project and efforts will end up amounting to. I then was ready to tackle this film.

For this project, I took two separate trips up to North Carolina to film Grandma, each trip yielding massively different results. This comes down to a few different factors, which included the change in weather, Grandma's inflammation of her chronic pain, and the absence of her dog, Buddy. Throughout the second trip to shoot with Grandma, she was constantly apologizing for

the inconvenience she thought she was wreaking upon me, even though most of what she would ask of me involved running to grab something for her in order for her to not spend triple the amount of time fetching something herself. She hires help with activities such as house chores, buying groceries, and helping her to go up the stairs to the only shower inside the house. During the warmer times of the year, she takes her walker to the outdoor shower installed right outside of the garage. Since it has gotten colder, showering outdoors would result in her catching

a cold that would debilitate her even more, so the woman she hires assists her up the stairs to shower during the colder parts of the year. My second shoot with her was during the colder part of the year, so more assistance was necessary, especially with the inflammation of the pain in her shoulder. Her confidence was considerably less than my first shoot with her during the much warmer climate of a North Carolina Summer.

Her ailments have thrust her into physical dependence on others, which has been a contributing factor to her decline in self-confidence. According to socio-cultural researchers Laura Clarke and Erica Bennett, many older women are “fearful of becoming a further burden on their loved ones,” (Clarke and Bennet 352) which is precisely the behavior my grandmother was displaying. This was a factor that played out in the footage I was able to collect the second time around, starkly contrasting to the optimism and confidence I was able to capture on the first shoot with her.

I was able to assemble a rough cut of the footage I collected from my first trip in the Summer of 2018 during the same semester as fleshing out my thesis proposal, but I really got into the nitty gritty of editing or post-production in the Spring 2019 semester. I produced cuts implementing footage from both trips and sought out notes constantly from peers who are filmmakers, but most importantly from my Thesis Chair and Committee. I vowed to edit for at

least an hour a day; some days resulting in me closing out of the project file without saving due to a lack of progress after an hour, while other days resulted in massive strides in the right direction at the end of an eight-hour editing session. The content of the film being so personal results in periods of time where I feel I am too close to the project to view and critique it without removing the proximity to the subject, my own grandmother, from my scope. Because of this, I have recruited a co-editor for basically being on call to give me unbiased feedback whenever I feel I am unable to rule out the closeness to Grandma in order to properly progress.

## Conclusion

I crave authenticity and honesty from every person and interaction -- especially when a camera is in hand. I have learned so much of my grandmother through means of capturing, interviewing, going through home videos, as well as further research into scholarly articles and journals about the psychology of older women. There is much to receive from others. My art has always indicated to me my craving for documentation and, separately, more experimental filmmaking practices. This project has given me the opportunity to combine these two practices into one film, leaving me with an artwork of which I will be most proud.

This film has turned into something quite different structurally than what I had originally intended. I started with wanting to shoot very quiet, still portraits of my grandmother in her home she occupies for each Spring and Summer. I've now expanded upon that and given both her and I a much more present voice. I've always been deemed "a good listener" and one that "doesn't talk a lot". I suppose this film is where I exert those traits and just gather as much of a woman who helped in raising me. I've learned exactly how much our relationship means to her, her thoughts on keeping focus on her career, her thoughts on never having her own children, and her thoughts on living in a world without the love of her life by her side. I often turn to others to reassure my own insecurities and fears which most commonly amount to fear of failure, loneliness, and depression. I asked her repeatedly through the different interviews I've conducted with her and the countless phone calls I've taken with her how she remains happy. She always conveniently dodges answering the question directly. But I've learned that she remains happy through just remaining present and talking. As long as she is able to connect with people, even strangers or her own small dog, she is happy. I guess we're similar in that way. I remain content and happy through my connection with people, even if there's a camera jammed between us.



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