



# THANK YOU, STRANGER

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For a moment, be still, and remember the people who showed you kindness when you needed it the most. The everyday folks, the quiet presences that changed your life in ways they will never understand. Which one of these people would you go back and thank? Which ones do you wish you could see one more time?

Would it be the acquaintance who once gave you such a shining compliment that you still remember it now, five years after you last crossed paths? Or the coworker who remembered your name on your second day? The one who said, unintentionally, “I see you; I remember you.” What about the classmate who messaged you whenever you were missing from class, proving that “yes, people do notice my absence?” Or perhaps that one friend in the group who kept listening even when everyone else talked over you.

Do you remember these people? Of course, you do. To be human is to be sewn together by the small kindnesses of innumerable strangers. Some stick out more than others, but even the briefest connections are capable of creating a life-long positive impact. Every person, regardless of their story, has a list of characters who aided them along the way. In order to highlight the stories of just a few of these strangers, I sat down with four different people and asked them this simple question:

“If you had the chance to go back and thank someone who was only in your life for a brief period of time, who would it be?”

The responses both amazed me and confirmed my suspicions: We are all made up of the radical kindness of those around us. Through the stories of a woman with terminal cancer, an amiable coworker nicknamed “Grandpa,” a choir teacher’s encouragement and a motherly Thai woman, we can glimpse the power of remembering names, noticing others, reaching out and sharing a bit of ourselves.



### *The Boy, a Stranger and Cancer*

What could a talkative third-grade boy have in common with a twenty-year-old woman? The answer is cancer.

Elijah Jones, a second-year Bachelor of Applied Theology major, spent much of his early life in hospitals being treated for leukemia — blood cancer. While other children were enjoying field trips or eating lunch together, Elijah was enduring chemotherapy and blood transfusions. In the blink of an eye, he was separated from the usual experience of childhood.

But Elijah won that battle. The cancer is gone, and he now sits beside me, his lanky body curled comfortably into the oversized, plush chair. It is so strange and so wonderful that he is here, alive and bursting with enthusiasm. There are many people to thank for bringing him to this interview: the doctors, the nurses, the scientists, the blood donors. But there is one person who, in her quiet consistency and stubborn kindness, helped to carry Elijah forward.

“I remember when I was in oncology, and I was getting an IV of someone else’s blood,” Elijah begins. “There would always be this one girl, either 18 or 20 [years old]... and I would always say ‘hi’ to her.”

That’s where their friendship began. That’s where many friendships begin: in the quiet understanding that, day after day, you will see one another. Even if you have nothing in common, the shared experience of showing up is a powerful tool for connection. Consistency is a form of kindness, and, in the midst of cancer, it is a comfort. No one knows this more than Elijah who, out of the days of chemotherapy and blood transfusions, still remembers the face of his kind friend.

“I know that she had... Cancer,” Elijah says. He knows, because, in true elementary-aged fashion, he asked his mom, loudly and pointedly, “Why does her arm look weird?” The woman only

laughed before taking the time to explain why her face and arms were covered in inflamed, red-yellow areas, and why, sometimes, she wore long T-shirts under her short-sleeved dresses.

“I’m similar to you. [Just] a little bit different,” Elijah remembers her saying.

After that, Elijah watched for her. There isn’t much you can do to save another person facing cancer, but you can look for them in a crowded room. That is exactly what Elijah did. He would make a note of every day that the woman was at the oncology center.

During those long weeks, Elijah began to speak with her more frequently. Together, they would discuss his classes, his life and his interests. He remembers her laughing and saying, “you’ll need all of this one day,” whenever he complained about the things he was learning at school. Their conversations were small, but he remembers them vividly.

Then, one week, during his increasingly frequent blood transfusions, the woman’s regular spot was empty. Elijah, hoping for the best, dreaming that she had recovered and been sent home, asked a nurse, “Do you know where she is?”

The nurse, with the apologetic head tilt of an adult who knows something a kid does not, looked at Elijah’s mom and then said, “She’s doing something else, now.” That was that, and Elijah moved on.

It wasn’t until years later that he realized what had really happened. “I wish I could have told her thank you,” he says, his voice thick with emotion, “before she passed away.” He says he knows, now, that she did pass away. That the look the nurse had shared with his mom had meant the worst.

“She was so impactful because it was someone other than my mom, someone, other than a nurse, that was talking to me,” he explains.

When asked what he would say to her if given

the chance, Elijah replied:

“I just wanted to say thank you. For being my first friend, in a way. Thank you for being you. [It meant a lot] for a young kid to be able to go to a hospital and... almost have a family.”

Despite the overwhelming experience of being hospitalized, Elijah still remembers a kind woman, her gentle voice, and the way she made him feel at home when he was at his sickest.

### *Thank You, Grandpa*

In order to eat, drink and live, we rely on the people who work the humble jobs that keep our world running. Karisma Esparza-Negrete, a freshman architecture major at CBU, remembers her coworker, affectionately nicknamed “Grandpa,” who was one of these people. He spent most of his days behind the scenes at Stater Bros., getting paid to cut meat and manage the younger employees. What he wasn’t paid for, however, was the encouragement that he gave to those around him.

“He was like a grandpa. We called him Grandpa,” says Karisma. Grandpa had initially pushed against the nickname, before reluctantly accepting his role with the grace of someone who had always been ready to take it. “Once a week we would have coffee, and he would just talk to me about life, and why I shouldn’t give up, and why the world has so much to offer, and why I shouldn’t just stay in the position that I am, especially if I’m going to be unhappy.”

Karisma’s description of Grandpa is peppered with memories of his brightness: “He would always come in every day with a smile, bringing so much joy and bringing light... He was very fun and very charismatic. ... He had a lot of joy. ... From his smiles to his laughs to his jokes, he was always very welcoming and warm, very warm.”

But while Grandpa did have a lot of joy, he also had his regrets. “Some days he was really grumpy... but he never made us feel like we were the reason why. He had [just] gotten stuck in the job... after he came out of the army. He never had the chance to keep building because he started having children.”

But despite his disappointment in his own journey, he never stopped speaking encouragement to Karisma. “He always told me and my coworkers to never give up on our dreams, and he was very passionate about us, about [telling us to] keep going and to not get stuck, because he had past experience.”



Karisma attributes returning to college at 24 to the push she received from Grandpa: “He was actually the reason why I left my job at Stater Bros. [And] if I was at Stater Bros. still, I probably wouldn’t be where I’m at today. A lot of the people he would talk to — a lot of them would start going back to school.”

Grandpa passed away around a year ago. To Karisma, though, his impact remains. Last fall, she was accepted at CBU. “He was one of the first people I texted. Even though he had passed away, I still texted the phone number. I said, ‘I just want to say thank you.’”

Grandpa pushed Karisma to escape the mundane and encouraged her to pursue what he knew was waiting for her. Through this all, he put himself last, viewing himself as a lost cause. But that is not what Karisma saw:

“He would say all the time, ‘Don’t give up. Don’t be like me.’”

“I thought, ‘But I want to be like you.’”



### Finding a Voice

Isabelle Ray, a junior creative writing major, sits across the table, her eyes bright and sparkling, her voice strong and grounded. There is no sign of shyness or hesitancy in her laughter or gestures. But, according to Isabelle, things used to be different. The Isabelle who joined a choir in Germany during her junior year of high school was quite opposite from the one sitting across from me. “I had always loved singing,” says Isabelle, “but I was also super quiet, and shy, and I was not able to sing... boldly.”

There was a block in front of her, a lack of confidence that held back her voice. It wasn’t until meeting Mr. Loe, the choir teacher, that she was able to overcome that lump of anxiety in her throat. Mr. Loe was a quirky man who wore funny socks and a pair of glasses, a teacher that “was just so sweet and happy” in everything that he did.

Isabelle remembers his classes fondly, although they only took up an hour of her week. Such a small amount of time, and yet, “he would try and get to know us,” she says. “Try and push us a little bit.” Mr. Loe chose to spend his precious hour on intentionality, part of which was encouraging every single student to audition for the choir. “He would go person by person and [ask], ‘do you want to try out? Do you want to try out?’ It would take a lot of time, of course, but it was a very intentional move. You may not feel brave enough to raise your hand, but if you were intentionally asked, you would say yes.”

“I have no idea if he was a Christian or not,” she says, “but I wouldn’t be shocked if he was, because his demeanor was just...” She trails off.

I am sure we all know what she means: there are some things, some markers of the Christian faith, that just cannot be described. That inexplicable joy, that enduring kindness. “His son had cancer,” she shares, “but you would have never known by his demeanor. He never acted like he had this burden on his shoulders, of sadness.” There was an untouchable, recognizable light that pervaded his presence.

His encouragement worked. “I ended up feeling an ounce of confidence,” Isabelle recalls. “When

he went around for solo tryouts, I said, ‘OK, I’ll go.’ He was completely surprised, but then he pushed me. It was the most nerve-wracking thing ever. I was so scared. [But] he would always talk with me, and [say], ‘you need to have more confidence in yourself.’ That really transformed my confidence, especially relating to singing. Now, I really have no care if people hear me.”

Isabelle can see how this push to confidence influenced other aspects of her and her classmates’ lives: “I think once you have confidence somewhere, at least it’s there because it’s much harder to [initially] find [it]. Once you have the discovery, now you’re like... ‘I know what it’s like

to have confidence in singing, so if I really rely on that, I can build more confidence in being an RA, or confrontation and all of that.”

For one hour a day, one day of the week, Mr. Loe would show up, brimming with encouragements, ready to see each student with the intention that only true kindness can foster. There was a strength in his being that amplified Isabelle’s heart and voice. Just one hour of a week, and she still remembers him now, even as she is sitting at another school in another country, far from the place and time where Mr. Loe taught her what she now knows about singing — and confidence.



### To Practice Saying Goodbye

Mante Petersen, a graduate student in counseling psychology and counseling ministry at CBU, responds to my question with a simple sentence: “I want to talk about my host mother in Thailand.”

From 2016 to 2018, Mante served as a Youth Development Worker for the Peace Corps, a government agency that trains and deploys volunteers in order to assist developing countries.

“I was... working in a small village, teaching children English and life skills, training young Thai children to become leaders. I did this in a rural village in the Gulf of Thailand,” he explains. “This was a time in my life where I learned to be resourceful, [to] have resiliency. I learned about the capacity of love. I learned about compassion.”

A large part of this love and compassion came to Mante in the form of a seventy-something Thai woman with rough hands and a raspy voice. “The name for ‘mom’ is ‘meh,’ and I would call her Meh,” says Mante. “I spent 27 months in Thailand. My first three months, [during] the time I spent learning the language and getting accustomed... even in regards to my darkest times in culture shock... Meh was the one who got me through.”

Mante remembers the challenging of his identity in Thailand, especially in conjunction with the injustices occurring back in America. “In the United States, there was a lot of racial unrest. I was still connected with people back home, and there was... a darkness, even a survivor’s remorse... of being in a place like Thailand.” Not only was Mante having to adjust to a culture outside of the United States, but he was coming to terms with the reality of being the only Black person in the village where he lived. In the midst of this loneliness, and despite their differences, Meh took Mante’s uncertainty into her calloused hands and sat with him in silence.

“I think I came in with insecurities,” he remembers, “[and] what my host mom did was she met me with love, dignity, curiosity, and a genuine sense of warmth. From the small things of making a meal, to just being in silence with me on those lonely nights when I would cry myself to sleep from being homesick.”

“From a cultural standpoint,” says Mante, “she did things that were atypical for a Thai woman... [it was strange] for an older woman to have a young man in the house. But I was recognized as her son.” Mante’s filial relationship to Meh acts as proof that there is no cultural barrier that love cannot cross.

But while love doesn’t end, it does change. Now, rather than being with Meh in the present, Mante loves by looking back: “The reason why I will never be able to say thank you is when I left Thailand, I knew that it was important for me to let that experience go.” Mante doesn’t know where Meh is, how she is doing, or if she is even still alive. Because of his choice to disconnect from social media, he doesn’t have a link to anyone from his past in Thailand who could tell him these things. But what he does know is that the love for his host mother has remained.

Life moves on, and the illusion of social media

has convinced us that it doesn’t, that we are meant to be bound to the people of our past forever. We wonder if our love doesn’t mean as much if we say goodbye for good. But Mante doesn’t see it this way: “For me, making the decision that I wouldn’t be on social media was also a decision that there was a lot of people from my past that I would never have the opportunity to speak to again... That, for me, has been the hardest part of making a decision that I thought best for my mental health... But there’s a human aspect of allowing relationships, friendships and loved ones to remain in the past. To just be seasonal, rather than forever.”

Mante pauses to make room for memories. It is obvious that his act of letting go did not mean forgetting. There is only warmth and emotion in his voice when he says, “I was known as her son, and it was a beautiful thing.” Wherever Meh is, she must be holding a matching memory close to her, although her time with Mante has since passed.

Even if Mante wanted to return, he doesn’t think he could. “There comes a point where you lose the language. There comes a point when the things that were so heavy on your mind... you begin to lose them.” Here he is, encountering the grief that comes with inevitability, choosing to accept its course. When asked what he would say to Meh if given the opportunity, Mante pauses. Then, with tenderness, he speaks the language he is already beginning to forget:

ผมสบายดีผมรักแม่ผมรักคุณตลอดไป

I am good. I love you, mom. I love you forever.

### Thank you, Stranger

All of the strangers in these stories have something in common: they will never know the extent of their impact. Whether it be because they have passed on, moved on, or are simply subject to the human tendency to forget kind truths about themselves, they will never grasp what their words and consistency meant to those around them. Remember this the next time you feel small and insignificant: you don’t know who is looking for you in a crowded room.

Finally, as an exercise in love, be still and choose to intentionally remember that teacher, coworker, acquaintance, friend, classmate or peer who, in unwavering goodness, continued to meet you the way that Meh once met Mante: “with love, dignity, curiosity, and a genuine sense of warmth.” ♦

