

Impressive: In Harvard Yard

I reached into my graduate student cubbyhole mail box sometime in early Spring of 1983, and pulled out a thick white envelope marked 'Commencement Information.' Inside were detailed instructions from the University about our upcoming graduation on June 9th: up to 6 tickets could be requested per grad.

Wow! It was really happening! I thought about who I really wanted to be there, and who could come. 28 and single, finishing a Master's program at the Harvard School of Public Health in Boston. Obviously, my Mom. Probably not my sister – too far away. A few close friends. Then I thought: *what about Grandmom Peck*, my father's tough-ass mom? By then, formidable Grandma Ida was in her eighties, recently widowed, and living semi-independently in a Philadelphia high rise. She led with judgment, expected success, and was not easily impressed.

The path to Harvard had been less than linear and against the odds. Only people with prior health professions degrees – physicians, dentists, nurses, social workers, nutritionists – were permitted to apply to the master of public health program. I had cobbled together a bachelor's, having left undergrad to figure it out, eventually going back to become a physician's assistant, then practicing in primary care clinics in the San Joaquin Valley and along the US-Mexico border in Brownsville, Texas. But I wanted the knowledge and power to change systems hurting mothers and children.

I knew I wasn't eligible. I applied anyway, and only to Harvard. A remarkable Department Chair of Maternal and Child Health took a chance on me - on her terms: no financial aid, two years instead of one, and don't fail. Determined, passionate, fearless, I worked my butt off: took out loans for everything, found cheap housing, worked as a graduate assistant. By second year, I was invited into the Doctoral Program. That Spring, I was elected Graduation Speaker for the Class of 1983.

I rented cap and gown, ordered tickets, and purchased my first academic hood – black silk with a plush gold-yellow velvet collar for 'master of science,' trimmed in Harvard crimson silk. Then I called my grandmother. It was still a tender time: six years since my dad left my mom, five years since the divorce, and just over three... since his suicide. But my mother understood how much I wanted – needed - to make her, and her, and him...proud. So, she agreed to bring her ex-mother-in-law to Boston.

June 9th was a glorious warm Spring day. Thousands of grads in caps and gowns, sitting on folding chairs in Harvard Yard. Morning sun filtering through a canopy of trees dappled our faces, as world leaders gave speeches. But the best part was afternoon commencement, held in the courtyard of the School of Public Health across town. I wore a simple summer dress and had pinned my father's Purple Heart on it, right over my heart. Walking across that courtyard stage in flowing academic garb and too high heels, I could I not stop beaming as I shook Dean

Fineberg's hand, accepting my first Harvard diploma. They said my passionate, fiery commencement speech knocked it out of the park...though I could not tell you now one word I said then.

I felt thrilled... relieved... exhausted... proud that I had pulled it all off. A decade of darkness seemed bathed in new light. Sitting with Grandma Ida after it was all over, I remember waiting for it. Her praise. Her respect. Her admiration. Her blessing. *"Very nice,"* was all she said. Then she went on about my older cousin Rachel, who had started a small business making brownies about the time I started grad school, and how great it was she was opening a bakery with her husband. *"Mummela,"* she said, patting my hand. *"Some day you, too, will become successful."*

I let out a tiny gasp. Really? Tears welled up and started to sting. I swallowed hard to push them back, and took a breath. Slipping my hand through the robe's open front seam under the yellow velvet hood, I felt for the Purple Heart. Slowly, I stood up, to my late father's mother, and said, *"But Grandmom, I already am successful. I already am!"* And I knew it. I knew it for sure.

That was a long time ago, and I can't remember what she said next. But I clearly recall that very moment, when I learned for the first time that the only person I ever need to impress, is me.

Impressive.2 magda@magdapeck.com.

Presented for the first time on stage at Petaluma West Side Stories, May 1, 2019