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CURC Writing Competition – 2nd Place: Creative Non Fiction
Spring 2016

My Definition

Throughout my college years, I've been fortunate enough to have encountered women who have inspired me. They are from different cultures and walks of life, but they all have shaped my definition of what it means to be a woman. It is their examples that have given me direction in a world where the definition of woman is lost somewhere between feminist extremists and fashion magazines. This is my story of their stories.

It started about a semester into my freshman year. I had made some new friends who were locals in town and who lived with their parents. It was through one of these friendships that I met Maria, a house-mom from Puerto Rico who moved to Colorado with her husband and raised her family here.

Maria is always in the kitchen. She is the kind of person who, unprompted, will bring you a snack when you're studying and who will surprise you with spontaneous picnic lunches. If you agree to take home one Tupperware of leftovers, you end up with three. If she finds out you have a cold, you'll get care packages of tea and Ziploc baggies full of vitamins with a hand-written note. She cooks all the meals in her house without a peep of complaint or a glimmer of resentment. Truly, her joy is providing for others.

As a millennial, I have certain presuppositions about house-moms, and Maria defies them all. I waited to find the woman who lost her potential behind Tupperware and linens. I met instead a vibrant, generous spirit who gives freely expecting nothing in return. I found the rare type of generosity that makes a person's presence felt even when they're not in the room. When her name is brought up amongst my friends, it is always met with praise. Hers is the rare kind of selflessness that inspires others to love and to serve.

And so Maria gave me the first part of my definition.

The semesters passed, I decided to study abroad. I went to the south of France, where I lived with a host family. And it was there that I met Valerie.

Valerie was the kind of woman who was, in every way, committed to what she did and who made no excuses. She managed being a single mother of two teenagers, a realtor who was her own boss, a host parent, and also having a vibrant social life all at the same time. One morning, she glided down the stairs in the morning, looking absolutely fabulous and greeted me with a cheerful "Bonjour" before throwing the end of her silk scarf around her shoulder before breezing out the door to hop on her scooter and go off to her day's tasks.

It was in that moment that I realized that I was looking at a leader. Modern women are expected to wear a lot of hats. Not only did Valerie wear many hats, but she wore them with grace and excellence. She also managed to take care of herself and not spread herself too thin. I realized that

if Valerie has succumbed to the stress of her situations or who had neglected herself in trying to get all of it done: no one would want to be like her. Not her kids, not me. But she didn't. She wasn't distant or stressed. She was a living, breathing example of how to make time for the things that are important and maintain a balance in life.

And so I gained the second part of my definition.

The story has somewhat of a surprise ending. It surprised me, anyway. After I returned home and entered into my final semester of college, I found the third part of my definition. I found it in someone who was very familiar: my tried-and-true American mom, Julie. Knowing anyone for that long, you see their ups and downs. Of which my mom has had her fair share. Things haven't always been easy for my mom. Growing up, I knew tired Julie and I knew sad Julie. I thought that was who my mom was, but in the past couple months that has proven not to be true.

It started with the tattoo: a hummingbird flying across her shoulder in a riot of colors. Then there was the foot surgery; nagging pains from years of stress on her feet finally lifted, one foot at a time. It was a long and hard process but it didn't seem to hang on her the way other things have. She even decorated her boot with stickers and rhinestones. Then there was the yoga, and then the drum lessons, and the going dancing. I came home once to find my mom and her new friends who I'd never met before, all having a jam session in our basement.

At first I wrote this off as an unusual case of nearly-empty nest syndrome. But I don't think it's that anymore. There's a new energy, a new joy in my mom that I haven't seen. The past doesn't seem to cling to her. It has become apparent to me that my mom is currently re-inventing herself. She's becoming a new, happier, better version of herself. Or maybe she's just becoming the person she's always been. She could have kept all the bad things in her life as part of her identity, but she didn't. She could have been passive and complacent, but she wasn't. I'm so proud to have a mom like that, who had the strength and courage to take charge of her own story.

And so my mom gave me the third, crucial element for my definition of woman. That we are human. We are not bound by our circumstances, or our past, or even our mistakes. We are redeemable, re-imaginable, re-inventible. Really, we are human.

These women all live in a way that makes you stand up and take notice, who inspire action just by their presence. They have all helped me understand what it means to be a woman, and built my definition of woman through the way they live their lives. I can only hope that by following their example I can stir up the desire within women to be the best versions of themselves and help them find their own definitions.