

Sample Student Paper

_____ was born in January 1932 and is now eighty years old and lives in Minnesota. She grew up in an apartment in the Bronx in the 1940's and 50's and went to the Bronx High School of Science. Her parents were middle class, intelligent, and Jewish by definition, but did not practice any religion at home. Her father was an optometrist and her mother was a homemaker.

_____’s definition of coming of age “starts at adolescence when one becomes aware of the world around them.” She considered her coming of age to begin around the age of twelve, and she says she is still learning and changing every day. When I asked what the American Dream was when she was young, she said at the time it was to end World War II and live in peace. By that time she was involved with United Nations Youth which she continued with after the war because the goal was to prevent war from happening again. She did say she probably had a greater interest in government affairs and social justice than her peers, starting when she was young. It was because of her father’s passion for political and government issues. The Sunday morning talks on the radio from the Ethical Culture Society were like religion in her family.

The American Dream to her had always been that everyone could get an education, go to college if possible, get a job, and be able to support a family.

_____ worked hard to achieve this dream and did so with practically no money. She said she never even thought about living in a [single-family] house because she had never done that before. Her current environment was very similar to what she pictured for her future, not because it was what she wanted most, but because it was all she knew. When I asked if her peers had similar dreams, she

said they didn't really think or talk about the future very much, so she didn't know if her peers really had the same long-term goals.

When I asked if her peers achieved their dreams, she told me that they were mostly very successful, but it was evident to her that the women were limited by jobs that were meant for women at the time. She personally was interested in psychology and went into social work and counseling careers, but she says, "If I had been a man, I might have gone into psychology or psychiatry." She watched almost all the men in her class become esteemed doctors and scientists and professors, while most of the women became schoolteachers. Though some of them may have aspired to be teachers, it's hard to believe that was every woman's top choice. Her view was incredibly skewed because she went to a science school for advanced students where only one girl in her whole graduating class did not go on to college but instead went to a more specific vocational school to further her goals.

_____ 's only regret is not pursuing her interests further. She was an anthropology and sociology major in college, but was told she couldn't do anything with it other than teach so she shifted her focus. She is still taking classes in everything that interests her, but she does wish she had done more in the area of research and sociology. When _____ had kids, she stayed out of work and turned down a few dream jobs for the first eight years (until her children were both in school). She valued spending this time at home, and I wonder if that was because *her* mother was always home for her and her sister.

She has worked in schools and interacted with younger people her whole life, and the biggest change she sees in the American Dream is that kids have to think

more about the future now than they did back then. "Due to the economy, teens today have to worry about a college they can pay for, picking majors that will lead them to a field where they can find a job right out of college, and choosing careers that can support them until old age," she tells me. In the 50's it was much less of a concern for _____ and her peers and neighbors. _____ had noticed that her children and their children have been influenced by the way they were raised, not blatantly teaching but just by modeling, the same way she formed her interests and her American Dream.

Adam, Lea, Meghan and I each interviewed a grandparent with totally different experiences and perspectives. I think that is very representative of any decade because there are many factors that contribute to one's perspective and place in society. Though each had very different experiences and perspectives, if you boil it down, their basic dreams have the same structure most dreams do: to become financially secure and start a family.

The 1950's generation saw potential for a change in women's place in society, but had yet to experience it. All three women interviewed mentioned that jobs available for women were limited, but that did not stop my grandmother or Adam's from dreaming of further education and jobs. Just like our generation is constantly reminded that half of the jobs that will be available to us as adults do not yet exist, women in the 1950's knew that by the time they were out of college, they would have opportunities. They wanted to take advantage of the ability to work that their mothers did not have. Adam's grandma specified she wanted to be

“more than just a stay-at-home” mom. Adam’s grandma said she was one of her few of her female peers who went to college, and it was even more uncommon for women to go to graduate school. She was fortunate to have supportive parents who helped her get through college financially and “motivationally.” My grandma may have come from an economically and academically advanced high school full of students who all furthered their education, but she did recognize that many more men than women in her generation went on to college. These women pursued women’s jobs, but definitely more than their mothers had ever dreamed of.

Lea’s grandmother’s story was extremely different because of her family’s recent immigration and economic situation. There was simply no way that could have afforded college. She saw the opportunity for women as a much more limited selection because, without a college degree, there was hardly anything for women to do once men returned from the Korean War. Because she wouldn’t ever be able to support herself and a family on a stenographer’s salary, her dream was to marry someone who could support her and to stay home with the kids. In my opinion there has never been anything wrong with being a stay-at-home mother, but it is unfortunate so many women like Lea’s grandmother had no other choices in the fifties.

All four interviewees dreamed of being financially secure regardless of what economic class they were accustomed to. This is something that has continued to be universal and timeless. Meghan’s grandpa had to work really hard to be financially comfortable, and even if money wasn’t overly abundant, he took great pride in being able to buy new cars every few years. To him, the ability to buy new cars seemed to symbolize that he was achieving the dream of financial

independence and security. He must have been raised with a strong work ethic, and it really paid off because he is now very happy.

Starting families was another common thread in all of our grandparents' dreams. This is another aspect of the American Dream that I think is timeless and more or less universal. It's all in the circle of life that everyone has experienced. Obviously all four of these interviewees achieved this part of their dream because Meghan, Lea, Adam, and I wouldn't be here otherwise! They spent different amounts of time earning the bread and making the home; they had different parenting styles; they had different financial resources; they lived in different places – but they all dreamt of a family of their own and eventually had one.

Like I said, financial security and wanting to start a family are still part of my generation's American Dream. I think for the most part my generation dreams of having steady jobs that allow for pre-recession, middle-class, economic comfort. A lot of what we dream is based off of what we fear. We fear losing our jobs because it is so common in today's economy, so we dream of steady careers. We fear divorce because the divorce rate today is over 50%, so we dream of marrying the "right" person and having healthy marriages. This seems like a very negative approach to dreams, but it is the realistic one.

Because the divide is less evident, I think many women don't realize there is any barrier between women's work and men's work, but it still exists. Luckily many of the stumbling blocks preventing genders from crossing into each other's jobs have been eliminated, though the college attendance rates have now flipped and

more women are furthering their education, there are still clear differences in which degrees they are going for. There are more men in research law, government and doctor positions, and more women in educators, social workers, and nurses.

I do not mean to argue that women's work is less important or challenging or respectable than men's work, just different. I see nothing wrong with the fact that different genders might be drawn to different careers, but I am not content with women being limited by things such as which jobs allow you to stay at home when you have a baby.

The length of time mothers stay home with their young children seems to be gradually dropping by generations. All of my great-grandmas were homemakers, and all of my grandmas and great-aunts worked before and after they had kids, staying home eight to ten years. My other aunts also continued working after their kids grew up; they each stayed home four to six years. I wonder how long I'll stay home with my kids.