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Actor

IT'S DIFFICULT NOT to think of my mother when I'm engaging seniors and teenagers in cross-generational drama therapy workshops. I actually named the program after her: The SGB Generation Bridge. SGB were my mother's initials. Sometimes I imagine her sitting among the seniors and teens, reticent at first but then opening up about her life and ideas. Perhaps she would form a heartwarming bond, like the ones I often see during our six-week programs, where the teenagers inevitably come to refer to their senior partner as their adopted grandmother or grandfather. When they get up to sing, dance, or perform together, I am reminded of the time when she asked me to take her to a discotheque because she wanted to be around young people and see them dance. I still regret that I didn't bring her, and I remember how she lit up when a musician came in to perform one day when she was in elder care.

My mother always had a youthful, positive outlook despite her challenges. I think her life was divided into two distinct parts. The first part of her life is chronicled to me through a history of photographs of a smiling, outgoing woman who loved life. While I recognize the features, the woman I knew as my mother was largely silent. In hindsight, I realize it must have taken all of her emotional energy to get through the workday so that when she came home, she simply shut down. Like most people who have schizophrenia, my mother's illness was triggered by personal tragedy. In her case, it was the end of her marriage and the subsequent death of her baby, whose passing she never really accepted. For as long as she lived, she clung to the belief that Kemp was alive.

Taking care of her was a big part of my life and my brother's life, but it was a labor of love, and I know that, from my perspective, it played a huge role in forming who I am and what I do today.

I grew up mainly in Harlem in the 60s and 70s. Despite my father's neglectful attitude towards us, his family made sure that we always understood we were loved, and we went to dinner at my grandparents' home at least once a week. From them and my mother's mother (with whom we at times went to live when times got hard), I always had the comforting sense of a supportive family and an understanding of my Caribbean roots.

But outside these warm and boisterous family gatherings, I was often alone. My brother played basketball outside while I stayed in and read comics, watched TV, and occasionally went to see classic movies, for which I developed a passion. Immersing myself in these forms of escapism is where I think I got my love for drama and understood and appreciated the cathartic opportunities it provided for gaining insight into my real life and escaping aspects of it that were uncomfortable for me.

The desire to make drama and performance a part of my life started early. I loved acting, dancing, and singing (although singing isn't my strongest suit). I loved Michael Jackson and Diana Ross and The Supremes. When I was in middle school, my friends and I would meet up in the hallway to practice our dance moves.

I always enjoyed school and was a good student. After middle school, I went to Bronx Science and then Syracuse University, where I majored in biology, which probably sounds like a departure. But coming out of Bronx Science, it felt like a natural progression to go into the sciences. Also influencing that decision was that my maternal aunt, who I admired and who was a strong influence in my life, worked as a scientist for a pharmaceutical company. In my mind was the idea that I should, somehow, follow in her footsteps. But organic chemistry was the turning point for me. I realized biology wasn't for me. At the same time, I was singing with the gospel choir and gaining a percolating sense that performing was.

So, I decided to take some time off school—go stay with my mom for a while and try and figure things out. She needed help financially, so I worked as an actuarial clerk, predicting trends. I needed that time to let my subconscious work it out: I decided I wanted to perform and be an actor, so I enrolled in the Theater Management Program

at Lehman College in the Bronx. That way, I thought, if I couldn't support myself as an actor, I had the management side to fall back on.

At Lehman, the craft of acting clicked. A professor, Bill Bings, said the theater was a tool to give people a voice without being overdramatized. He told me to remember that I was trying to relate a real person's story to an audience and that I should take that person's voice and perspective. That changed my idea about how to perform. Then, Joan Miller put me on the path to dance performance.

After college, I was introduced to dramatic therapy when I joined a theater company called *Morrisania Action Theater*. The director combined "the method" with psychology to develop his own technique. We reached out to communities to share their stories, so they could work through things and put on plays at correctional facilities, women's shelters, and other community settings. I found those audiences to be gracious and appreciative. It was very fulfilling work. At the same time, I also wanted to do more traditional theater, so I started performing in the Shakespeare outdoor summer theater in Connecticut, something which I still enjoy participating in, and various off-off-Broadway productions.

My acting career has included performing and directing in productions all around the country, including The Rosa Parks Story, Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry, and A Christmas Carol. I've also been in a few movies and an HBO special called "The Lost." But it's the work I do with seniors and teens, as well as the workshops I participate in at children's hospitals, that has been the most rewarding for me.

Only Make-Believe is a drama company that engages sick kids at hospitals through interactive theater. We go in as a group of three actors and do a play each week. We dress the kids up and get them to participate as much as possible. It's one hour a week when they forget about their illnesses. After the first week, I notice their eyes light up when they see us coming, and after a few weeks, even the most reticent child is laughing and animated. The staff tells us that for some children, it's the only time they brighten up. It's a dream job for me, and the excitement and joy that the children get from having us come is apparent when they rush over to hug us when we arrive and leave, and hurry to help us set up.

It's hard to see people living with challenges, especially children, but knowing that I help—that I use drama to help children escape their circumstances, just like I did as a child—gives meaning to my whole life, past and present. I think the body heals in tandem with the spirit, and I know I help those kids with that side of things. The truth is they help my spirit grow, too, every day.

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