

## My Hoosier Hero

When you think of a hero you usually think of someone who has provided great inspiration either through acts that involved great personal risk or someone who has set a great example for others by the way they have lived their lives and served others. I believe it is very rare that you can say someone has done both, but that is how I would describe my hero, my Grandpa, Lester Brown.

Grandpa was born in 1929, near the beginning of the Great Depression to a couple on a small Southern Indiana farm. He and a friend, another farm boy, quit high school and enlisted in the army their senior year, January 1945. The two of them completed basic training and were shipped together to the Pacific conflict where they helped mop up after the Invasion of Leyte.

Grandpa and his friend were then shipped to Okinawa and arrived on the beach head Easter morning, 1945. During the first week in Okinawa, Grandpa was wounded and his friend was killed.

After returning to service, Grandpa's company was attacking Nashiki Ridge when the enemy put intense mortar and machine gun fire upon the advancing troops, inflicting many casualties. Grandpa, on his own initiative, and with complete disregard for his own personal safety, made his way through the enemy fire and dragged three pinned down and wounded men to the safety of a rock.

During this time he was wounded by fragments from an enemy mortar shell but continued his job, giving the men first aid and staying with them until they could be

evacuated to safety. Only then did he consent to medical attention for his own wounds.

For this he was awarded a Bronze Star and a second Purple Heart.

Years later, the 96<sup>th</sup> Infantry Unit was awarded one of four Presidential Unit Citations for Bravery ever awarded. These were given in recognition for the heroic deeds they performed on Okinawa. Grandpa received a second Bronze Star.

These wartime experiences were so emotionally painful for Grandpa that he really will not talk about it. I learned most of these facts from Grandma and the military press release of the events. To this day my family only knows a little about his experiences.

In recent years we have traveled with him to some annual reunions of his fellow comrades in the 96<sup>th</sup> Infantry, and there among fellow soldiers, you could finally begin to see a glimpse of the horrors that they all lived through and the love and respect they share. I have now attended four reunions with Grandpa in various places across the country. While most kids would be bored to tears with the idea of attending a meeting with a lot of 80+ age people, it has always been a special time to share with Grandpa. I hope that I can attend more reunions with him in the future.

I was with him three years ago when the 96<sup>th</sup> had their last big formal gathering in Washington, D.C. The highlight of the trip for Grandpa was being able to visit the new World War II Memorial and find his friend's name listed among the honored dead, he said he had finally been recognized for his precious gift. Grandpa still takes an American flag and a bouquet to his friend's grave in a small country cemetery near French Lick, Indiana almost every Memorial Day.

In spite of these experiences or because of them, my Grandpa has gone on to live an exemplary life and dealt with many other challenges. I have never seen him get angry or even raise his voice. Every day, he is an inspiration in how to conduct life with dignity and grace.

After he returned from the war, he earned his GED diploma and several hours of business credits from Indiana University. He and my Grandma had two children, my mom and my Uncle Brad, who developed diabetes when he was only two. So in order to pay health bills, Grandpa took a second job. During this time he never complained about his circumstances.

When my Uncle Brad was in college, one night while returning home from a friend's home he suffered an insulin reaction, which caused him to run off the road and flip his car, the result left Uncle Brad a paraplegic, confined to a wheel chair. For the last twenty-three years, Brad has required hours of special care and had many health issues. Grandpa has spent countless hours helping exercise Brad's legs to keep them from becoming permanently stiff, assisting him in and out of cars and helping with everyday tasks that he has difficulty performing on his own. Once again, I have never once heard Grandpa complain or seem resentful. After retirement, he served his community as a member of the Cumberland Town Council.

Shortly after Grandpa retired, I was born. At the age of 19 months, I was diagnosed with leukemia. The treatment of my disease required many trips to the doctor and special care during my three years of chemotherapy but Grandpa was always there to

help, taking me to pre-school and kindergarten, which allowed my parents not to miss as much work. On our car rides to and from school he taught me say my alphabet and count to one hundred by ones, twos, and fives. He also quizzed me on who held all the government positions like governor and President. I bet that I was one of a select few who could name Indiana's Lieutenant Governor at age four. I look back now and I am amazed at the enormous amount of time he gave and the endless love he showed to help mold my sisters and me into the people we are today.

Finally, when I was eight years old, Grandpa was diagnosed with prostate cancer and had to undergo chemotherapy treatments. Like the many other battles Grandpa had already endured, this was no different. He never said much, but he beat the cancer and kept his faith in God.

Now he and I have one more thing in common, we are both cancer survivors. Every year our community participates in "Relay for Life" and a part of the weekend celebration is the "survivors walk" around the track at our high school. Grandpa thought I might be embarrassed and not want to do this with him when I was in middle school, but it has always been an honor for me to be able to walk in this event with Grandpa. Every year I look forward to walking in this event with the man that I call my hero. I will soon be 17, the age my Grandpa was when he entered the army. He will soon be 84 and he has lived proudly and humbly all those years while serving family, community, church and country. Grandpa has lived his entire life as an example of service to others and

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Hero: Lester Brown  
Page 5

endured adversity with grace that I so admire. It is with tremendous love and pride that I  
nominate my Grandpa, Lester L. Brown, as my Hoosier Hero.