

# Recipe for Life

Interview with an Older Woman Essay

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*(From left to right: Annie Edmisten, Velma Cochran, Rachel Edmisten, Kathy Cochran, Phyllis Edmisten)*

“Now tell me a little more about this project,” said Kathy, as she lit a cigarette and carefully sipped her tea. I told her that it wasn’t just a project, it was something that I had wanted to do anyway, preserving her story for future generations – her grandchildren especially. Kathy Cochran has a certain elegance about her, always in heels and earrings and with kind eyes and a knowing smile. She has two daughters, one of which is my significant other. I don’t call her ‘mom;’ she prefers even her children to call her Kathy. ‘Ma’am’ is out too, that’ll just make her “feel old.”

Don’t let the heels and earrings fool you though, she can throw on a pair of boots and muck in with the rest of them. She’s an accountant by day; horse boarder by night. Her farmhouse in Bristol is slowly being renovated and redecorated, but the back porch is usually where you’ll end up if you’re paying her a visit. It overlooks the backyard where you can see her three donkeys, two dogs, and a small barn. She used to have horses, but this year – she’s boarding donkeys.

“I grew up on a farm, a large farm,” said Kathy, when she started to describe being raised on a 107-acre farm. “I was expected to labor as a guy would labor, but as far as decision-making and things like that, I was supposed to be old fashioned kinda girl.” Kathy went on to describe laboring in the fields, learning how to be domesticated, and keeping her opinions to a minimum. I think one thing that influenced her to be the woman she is today is that she was never allowed to share what she was thinking. “The first real ambition that I remember having was to get off the farm and never ever go back,” said Kathy in all seriousness. “Over time, that has changed. I would not mind having a farming life, just not a total farming life.”

Kathy escaped the farming lifestyle when she decided to go to college for a bachelor's degree in Executive Accounting. I asked why she chose to major in accounting, particularly because I loathed mathematics. "I had learned that people are very unpredictable," she said, "and I didn't like that; numbers are always predictable."

For someone who detests unpredictability, Kathy did the unpredictable for women of that time and learned how to be independent and self-sufficient. "Women were not in business at all. They were either farmer's wives [or] had jobs like secretarial, nursing, or in housekeeping." She speaks of women in this generation in a completely different manner. "Women are in charge. They take charge. That was unheard of when I was growing up." When I asked her of why she thinks women are increasingly becoming more independent and being able to voice their opinions, her answer surprised me. It surprised me because she didn't even have to think of her answer. If someone had asked me that, it would have taken me a few minutes to think of it, because I have always had the freedom to voice my opinion. She hasn't. "We got tired of being put down, we got tired of being a second class citizen; we always knew we had intelligence and that we could make decisions. We grew tired of it and took a stand."

Kathy not only took a stand in the working world, she took one at home. In her late forties, she single-handedly filed for divorce from her husband and has been living the single life since. I really wanted to learn why did this, but the only thing she offered me was "my children grew up." I was hoping to dig deeper, so I asked her what she thought of living a single life as opposed to a married one. She laughed, because the answer was so obvious to her, "I love it! I make my own decisions and I love it."

She made her own decisions when it came to raising two daughters, as well, which was hard during her marriage. Kathy says her upbringing influenced her to raise her daughters quite the opposite. “I raised them to be individuals, not girls or women, but individual people.” She related a story to me about how her side of the family criticized her about the way she allowed Velma (her oldest daughter, my significant other) to dress. “She never wanted to wear dresses or get her hair all prettied up, or wear little dress shoes – most of my family felt that I should force her to wear dresses and be feminine.” The way she raised her daughters in comparison to her own upbringing is as different as “night and day.” It’s the things that Kathy didn’t teach her daughters that she feels are most significant, and I agree, because I was raised the same way. Not forcing religious beliefs on them and avoiding domesticity are the things she most remembers. She felt that those things were important to be discovered with their own free will and not be forced upon them. They were options, not requirements.

Kathy told me that she is disappointed at the amount of young women in this generation, that are taking good opportunities for granted. She feels that since the freedom to do as they wish has always been available to them that “they just take it for granted and just waste it.” I have to agree that women of my generation do not know what it’s like to have to work hard for something. We are allowed to get a degree in whatever we want, say what we want, and shoot for the stars. Women of Kathy’s generation had to work hard to be successful, if they didn’t want to just be someone’s wife. When Kathy spoke of missed opportunities of the younger generation, she got sad because those opportunities weren’t just handed to her when she was that age – and they certainly wouldn’t have passed them by.

I really admire Kathy for using her own upbringing to influence what or what not to do when she raised her two daughters. I think it played an important role in how she wanted her daughters to turn out. She didn't want them to struggle the way that she did, but she still wanted to teach them to appreciate and take care of things they have. Both of her daughters are really strong-willed and independent. They both have strong thoughts and opinions and voice them in a way that gets them out there, but they still take in the consideration of others as well. She taught them that it's okay to have an opinion and voice it. Neither of them are afraid to stand up for what's right. "She's the best influence I've ever had," Velma said, when I asked about her mom. "I can't even put into words what I think about her."

I can tell that Kathy is really proud of her daughters, not just because they are her daughters, but because of their accomplishments as women. When they get together, they all laugh like old friends. I asked her at the end of the interview that if she had a message to convey to her granddaughters (she has two granddaughters, one is 3, the other is 9 months) for the future, what would it be. She simply stated, "Don't settle. If you have a goal, if you have a dream, if you have an anything that you want – then go for it."

I think the generation Kathy was raised in is one that we take for granted. She is one of the women that revolted against settling for being a housewife and strived to take a stand. I know she worked hard to be where she is now, and she's proud of it. It's unfortunate, because as she gets older (she's 55), she's seeing how younger generations are taking their freedom for granted; the freedom that she worked so hard for.

I love that she's single and doesn't feel that she needs another person to make her feel complete. I think most women of her generation probably do not feel the same way.

Her advice to her granddaughters made me think about my own life as well. I don't fight for things that I want and I do let opportunities get away from me. I need to take a step up and fight for what I want. Kathy did, and she couldn't be happier with who she is today. She's a beautiful person, inside and out, and a tribute to any generation. I hope to grow older with the same recipe for patience, virtue, and confidence as Kathy does.