

Looking Beyond The Lines

Tiffany Shih

National winner of the Legacy Junior Public Speaking Award

Imagine, an adorable little child, with soft skin, chubby cheeks, and the sweetest giggle. Now imagine an elderly person with papery skin and all the signs of age.

Which one, for you, is easier to love? The cute little baby, or the elderly person with the wrinkled lines on the face?

Today I'd like to tell you how I learned to look beyond these lines. I'm going to share with you the story of my friendship with an old lady at our church called Doris.

Like many old people, she loves to talk. She used to come up to me after service and start rambling on about her flowers or her lawn-bowling or some random story that I wasn't really interested in. Once, she told me the same story three times!

I'm sure she meant well, but I thought Doris was far too long-winded, and frankly, rather annoying.

I told my mother this, and she challenged me to find out one interesting thing about Doris. I couldn't resist a challenge, so I set out to find a fact that would impress my mother.

I didn't expect much, but when I talked to Doris with a genuine desire to learn more about her, I discovered that she had once been a champion in the 200m sprint. I couldn't imagine the frail elderly woman in front of me going any faster than a slow hobble, let alone being a sprinting champion. I was amazed. And as I listened to her recount her experiences of her running days, I realised with surprise that I was actually interested in what she was saying. She was even able to give me some tips to improve my running.

After our conversation, I felt as if there was this fascinating young person in her that I had never recognized before. The next Sunday I found myself going up to her and initiating conversation. I never thought it would be possible, but I began to enjoy talking to her.

One of my most memorable moments with Doris was when she showed me her old photo albums. As she flipped through the pages, I found myself intrigued by pictures of the cute little girl opening presents on Christmas day, the excited high school student posing with her first place medal from the 200m sprint, the pretty young bride at her wedding.

And one photo at a time, I began to see the young person Doris had once been, and in fact, still was, just maybe not on the outside.

Even more than that, I began to appreciate the beauty in her stories. With every memory she recounted, she would impart a little bit of insight, a little bit of wisdom.

When I told her that I didn't think I was good enough for the school athletics team, she said, just give it a go. She told me she hadn't thought she was good enough, either, but when she gave it her best shot, she had become a champion athlete. In the end, I made it onto the athletics team. If it weren't for Doris, I wouldn't have bothered trying out.

She taught me the value of lasting friendship, as she told me about her closest friend Jessica, whom she's known since she was twelve. This inspired me to put effort into building friendships that I could keep, even when I was eighty.

Doris taught me many life lessons, but the most important thing I learned from her was to look beyond the lines on an old person's face.

When we look at the elderly, we see wrinkled skin and grey hair. What we don't see is the child skipping to school, the young man or woman serving their country in war, the worker marveling at the advances in technology. We don't see their contributions to society, and it is so easy to miss out on their wisdom. But if we take the time to show care for them, we will discover a whole world of amazing life stories, experiences and perspectives.

And so to the young people in this room today, I encourage you not to focus on how old the elderly seem, but rather on what you can learn from them. And to those of you who are more mature in years, I encourage you to share your life stories, as Doris shared hers with me. You can change the next generation.