

Painting a Picture of the Life of Sondra Hayes

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Sondra E. Hayes is a writer, poet, playwright, Spanish professor, music teacher, inventor, friend, and family figure. Sondra was born the youngest of five sisters in Indianapolis, Indiana to Eva Mae Danforth and Benjamin Ernest Albert James. To Sonya and Paul Hayes, she is mom. And finally, to Ella and Charli Bockelman, she is “Nana” or “Grandma Sondra”.

Throughout my lifetime, I have grown to view Grandma Sondra as smart, empathetic, and highly influential. She not only positively influences me, but our whole family and even people she meets daily. When I asked my mother for 5 words to describe Grandma Sondra, she listed: inspiring, innovative, creative, enlightened, and resilient. Grandma Sondra is a vital part of our family and society, she brings people together and encourages people daily to cultivate growth and community. Grandma Sondra serves God in great ways, she exhibits God's greatest commandments, which are to Love the lord your God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37 NIV). The purpose of this interview was to explore the differences in adolescents by exploring an understanding of generational differences. On a more personal level, this interview was intended to grow a deeper understanding of my grandmother's childhood, and how it shapes her today.

Sondra and her interest

The initial interview question, “What did you enjoy as a teenager?” sparked a conversation about school achievements. Sondra made it clear that her time was filled not with parties or substances, but with extracurricular activities, community involvement, and strong friendships. She was active in the girls' athletic association, orchestra, yearbook, junior achievement, youth group, journalism, and language clubs. Research indicates that such activities positively impact adolescents by promoting relationships and skills like teamwork and emotional regulation (Larson, 2000). Sondra credits her experiences with helping her develop

social skills she still relies on today. When reflecting on her high school years, she described them as fulfilling. Balancing community involvement, good grades, and friendships kept her days busy, even spilling into summer school. By her junior year, she had already surpassed the graduation credit requirements. Sondra stated she “enjoyed high school as a present moment.” Overall, her reflections painted a picture of her as a teenager, similar in interests and personality to now. She shared that her parents were strict but supportive, saying, “great! I was the baby,” which made us laugh. Her father often returned from the library with a box of books, sparking her love for reading and writing. In a story featured in the book “From the stage to Page”, Sondra describes her mother as dedicated, hardworking, and loving. It reads, “Mom dreamed of playing the piano like her teacher. Mrs. Roundtree's prowess at the piano made a lasting impression on her. Although she never took formal lessons, she taught herself to play by ear. My mother was determined to give her daughters the lessons she never had.” (Hayes pg. 217).

According to Sondra, her parents' high standards manifested as strictness. Yet, they were strict in other areas, they did not require her to go to bed at a certain time. When Sondra noticed that she could stay up without consequences from her parents, she started to stay up to play piano, write, or get lost in the pages of a book. According to Erik Eriksons theory, teenagers ages 12-18 are in the psychosocial development stage labeled “identity vs role confusion”, where they further their sense of self. Research has shown a correlation between music and emotional regulation and concluded that music can increase ability to self-regulate. (Baltazar, 2018). According to these theories and experiments, Sondra being willing to give up her sleep for more time doing what she loved, taught her how to regulate her emotions, express creativity, and form a greater sense of her role in the world.

Social issues

Following learning about her background with her parents, we refocused the conversation back to her high school experience during the civil rights movement. Grandma Sondra described her weekly experience, “I was a member of a youth group during high school, we would meet and talk about the issues and how to encourage people to vote. At the end of the meeting, we would all sing ‘we shall overcome’ together.” (S.Hayes, personal communication, Nov 2024). Sondra recalls majority of her education being segregated and tells a story from her junior year of high school. “A black teacher had pointed out how he did not believe the segregated lunchrooms were right. Later that day there was a major race riot on campus because a few black kids decided that they wanted to eat lunch in the white cafeteria. “Perceived discrimination specifically at school has been linked with poorer academic performance, including lower grade point averages (GPAs) and student engagement, as well as an increased likelihood of high school dropout. (J. Bottiani, H. Mcdaniel, et.al. 2020). Sondra beating adversity and pursuing higher education while continuing to be social is a measure of her resiliency, adaptability, and emotional intelligence.

Learning this information was profound, it offered perspective that these major social issues were not long ago. I made comments during our conversation which in turn, prompted Grandma Sondra to emphasize the importance of voting in each election. “So many people died for the cause” she says with a passionate and heartfelt tone. Although this interview was conducted over the phone, through her delivery of the short message, I envisioned all the uproar during this time and how puzzling it would be for people in newer generations to not exercise their right to vote.

Furthermore, she expands on a traumatic story which resulted from her hanging back at a meeting in order to put away chairs. Walking home, a group of white boys began to follow her

while shouting repeating “nigger!”, before chucking a cinder block at her head and missing. Young Sondra, fearful for her life, ran towards a fence, while the boys jumped in the car, with intentions to kill her and began driving in her direction. It wasn’t until another car honked, and scared the boys away, that a kind black man was able to walk Sondra home. Years later, Sondra could captivate the many details of the story, even the name of the company on the fence, and how the man explained the incident to her mother. “I talked about it for a long time, that helped. I was afraid, terrified even.” she says, “I didn’t stay late anymore, and my experience only secured a small article in the paper”.(S. Hayes, personal communication, Nov,2024). Grandma Sondra explained how growing up dealing with racism and Jim crow laws has affected her now. She describes a certain look evil and/or racist people display, and she can recognize it well. She tries to offset evil by being nice to everybody, and that has been her strategy all her life, to love.

Influences on success

Her parents and other influential figures instilled in her the belief that she could achieve anything she set her mind to. One of the most significant influences in her life was her uncle, Starling James, who earned a master's degree from Indiana University and became a respected educator and public figure. He was also known for his work as a public speaker for civil rights. Starling played a vital role in the desegregation of movie theaters and advocated for the hiring of African Americans in various industries. He even established a million-dollar scholarship fund for minority students in the Indianapolis Public School System. Having such successful role models around her made her confident that she could succeed as well. After high school, Sondra enrolled at Indiana Central to pursue her college education and later transferred to continue her Spanish major.

Concluding adolescences. Sondra's dedication pushed her to continue education at Butler university for a master's degree. Overall, when I asked my father how he would describe

his mother he said “a loving matriarch of success”, highlighting her role in nurturing and guiding her family toward achievement. Her high school experience has shaped her into the successful woman she is today, and her understanding of social issues has taught her to place value on the things that matter. To conclude, I asked one piece of advice she would tell her teenage self. After a minute of pondering, she laughs and answers “go join the choir, you would have been a good singer!” However, after further contemplation, she answered “I would tell my younger self to get more sleep and eat more of the healthy meals my parents prepared for me.” Grandma Sondra’s experience is vastly different than the students today. Her classmates dealt with racial segregation, gender discipline, limited curriculum, social pressures, and strict disciplines. Today, many issues revolve around phone usage, mental disorders, AI usage, conflict and , COVID learning losses, gender discrimination, and AI usage. Despite the differences in challenges faced, developmental milestones remain quite similar, with teenagers today still exploring their identities, striving for independence, regulating their emotions, and building strong social connections. Using this interview as comparison, it becomes clear that while the issues change, the journey of growth and self-discovery remains a fundamental part of adolescence for every generation.

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