

# EX Fabula

Story. Stage. You.

## Audio Transcript: Elaine's Story

3, 2, 1, Welcome to Ex Fabula! True, Personal Stories. Ex Fabula! Story, Stage, You.

Ex Fabula is a Milwaukee non-profit committed to strengthening community bonds through the art of storytelling.

Ex Fabula Fellows are community members who use personal stories to inspire community led dialogue around some of the most pressing issues in the greater Milwaukee area like segregation, and economic and racial inequality.

Ex Fabula Fellow, Elaine Maly, shared a story at "Young Professionals Group" in February of 2016.

So recently I was rummaging through a box of old photos I had from my grandma. I was looking for a photo to go with a blog I was working on. And I came across this short stack of letters that I'd written to her and my grandfather from girl scouts camp almost 50 years ago.

And most of the letters were real chirpy, you know, they said things like, "oh I really like my counselor and we're making arts and crafts, and we're singing around the campfire" and that sort of stuff. But one letter I can't get out of my head. This letter said, "Dear Grandma and Grandpa, Hi! I finally made it up here! It was a long, long road, but the scenery was beautiful. The food is good. There's one Negro in my unit. She's here on charity from St. Boniface Church where Father Groppi is. She doesn't have any of her own equipment or even a sleeping bag. She only brought her clothes. I feel sorry for her. My cot is very comfortable. I slept with the flashlight all night long." You can see why I couldn't get that letter out of my head. It reminded me of a whole lot of stuff.

I don't remember this girl. I don't remember if I reached out and tried to be friendly to her, or if I kept my distance, but I wonder about her. I wonder if while I was hiking and swimming, if she found a way to have fun in a place where there was no one else who looked like her. I wondered if she cried herself to sleep alone and afraid in her bunk every night. And then I wondered about myself. Like, why did I choose to write that to my grandparents? Oh yeah! This is why, because in 1967 everybody knew about Father Groppi and St. Boniface Church. That summer the NAACP Youth Counsel and Father Groppi were in the midst of the 200-consecutive day march for fair housing. Well, my grandparents weren't a fan of fair housing, and I know this because before I went to camp that summer riots broke out on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street. We were miles and miles away. My grandparents lived next door to us so we were there visiting. And I remember that my father asked my grandfather what he would do if the violence came to our neighborhood. And my grandfather pointed to the window and in the upstairs stairwell and he said, "I will get my shotgun and I will pick them off." I'm sure that this gave me nightmares forever. And I know this wasn't the first time I saw racism in my own family. You know, there was the time I was shopping for shoes with my mother when I was very young, I think I might've been five, and there happened to have been an African American gentleman who waited on us and I'd never seen anybody like him before. And I asked

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my mother out loud, "What's wrong with his face?" And my mother whispered and said, "God just left some people in the oven a little longer." Which made me think that he was kind of like a burnt cookie, kind of like me but imperfect. And I could go on and on about that.

But when I think about this girl at camp, I think that it might've been the first time that I noticed white privilege. I certainly wouldn't have called it that but I noticed it. A few years later as a girl scout my troop from the NW side of Milwaukee went to an inner-city school. We were going to teach poor under privilege kids how to read. I couldn't help but notice the difference between their school and my school. The book that we had and the books that they had, the desks that I had and the not desks that they had. I noticed when, years after high school graduation I ran into an African American man that I went to school with and we had a good time talking. And I thought, I went to John Marshall High School, I graduated in 1974, and at the time we all thought we went to this really awesome integrated school. Well when I talked to my friend John he said, "It was so hard for me to go to that school, to go to that predominately white school, you have no idea." And I thought, "You're right, I have no idea and I'm sorry." I went back and looked in my year book. There almost 1000 of us in my class, I counted eight brown faces.

And then there's all the times in my professional life when I'd be at meetings or out and about with my colleagues of color when everyone assumed that I was in charge when I was not.

I think that that letter for me brought all this up into my face. It reminds me that my cot has always been very comfortable. That I have always had all the equipment that I've needed. And that I have a flashlight, and that it's important for me to use that flashlight to examine the legacy of racism in my own family, and to continue to use it in a society that values being white over every other color in the rainbow. Thank you.

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