

Exceeding the Expected

An Ethnographic Project by Michael Lamberti

I started by asking my best friend, whom I know just about everything there is to know about by now, one simple question: “What was it like growing up in the environment you did, and what did you do to cope, and ultimately become the great goal driven person you are today.” See, I already knew Will Rogers; the fire-fighting musician who defines family not necessarily by blood. Will and I met freshman year of high school, and we both came from different worlds, but had more in common than we thought. We instantly clicked, though, that much is for sure. I can truly say there is a deep bond in our friendship that only gets stronger with time. I think I enjoyed how open he was about his experiences, and how open he was about his hardships. He grew up with an drug and alcohol dependent mother, suffering from mental illness, and a highly functioning alcoholic father doing just about everything he could to hold together the financial aspect of their family and household.

He ponders, “It all started going downhill when I was about eleven.” Will claims his mother always struggled mentally and abused drugs and alcohol, but it wasn’t until his mother’s parents both died in the same year, followed by her being legally excluded from the will by her siblings, that she began to spiral out of control. Will’s father worked nights, leaving Will and his brother George alone with their mother, who at that point, was only getting worse. She had been arrested for multiple DUIs and was often wrecking the house and getting the cops called on her. I asked Will, “Would you say you and your brother were acting as babysitters for your mother while your dad was at work?” Will chuckled and then replied, “No, we were just trying to hide from her.” Will told me how

him and his brother George would call their father frequently at nights, and speak with him when he was home, pleading for him to come take care of their mother.

Things took a bad turn once again when Will was approximately 13 or 14 years old when his father was laid off that year, resulting from an injury. “We went from a dysfunctional family with a stable income to a dysfunctional family with no income,” Will said grinning sarcastically. I asked him where his mother was working at the time and if she made enough at the time to at least keep the family afloat. He answered with, “She didn’t really work... I mean, she had jobs for like weeks at a time but was usually fired or laid off.” We continued talking about how tough it was being in that environment and how he and his brother sought means of coping or dealing with it all. “This was when I first started to realize the lack of a family aspect of my life was becoming detrimental to my health,” Will said in sudden realization.

If there is one thing I know about Will, is how much he loves his friends. “I really started depending on my friends... family, to me, doesn’t really have to be a blood thing.” Will found family any way he could. It was not much later that he started getting involved as a local volunteer firefighter at the Merchantville Niagara Firehouse in his home town. He and his brother both volunteered and each worked their ways up from junior firefighters to firefighters as after going through fire school and training at the firehouse. This was another family unit for Will, and an even bigger group of “big-brother-type,” figures. “It’s tough-love here... we mess with each other and then take each other out to lunch.” Not only did the firehouse create another family for Will, but he started taking junior firefighters under his wing. I hang with him and his friends at the firehouse often and he really is a big brother to the younger guys. He became very close

with one junior who went through similar experiences with his family, and helped him cope, and become comfortable with who he was and where he came from.

Music is another huge aspect of Will's life. This is one of the aspects that caused us to bond from the beginning. He is one of the best guitar players I know and has taught me quite a lot about music and composition. Music was merely an escape for Will. I asked him how he got into music because we had never covered that before. He replied with another chuckle and said, "At that point my father still had a social life and took me to his buddy Steve's house and they tried to teach me *Roadhouse Blues* by the Doors." He claimed to have immediately picked it up after one run through and described the experience as, "...the first time I was instantly gratified by something positive; music became a product of me." Will uses music as a way to free his creative mind, and he claims it helped him escape the present when things got rough.

As Will grew up, his brother moved out and was hired as a firefighter in PG County Maryland, his parents split and mother moved to Camden, fluctuating between getting clean and relapsing for several years, and he and his father moved to a house down the road. Going back to high school, Will and I went to Camden Catholic High School, which Will was able to afford because of a car accident when he was thirteen where he was awarded a large sum of lawsuit money. Will immediately opened up to me within days of us being acquainted, speaking about his experiences and where he came from. We have a joke today that "Anything that can go wrong... Will", because every time I turned around his car wouldn't start, or he woke up with a flat, or worse, his mom was back in the hospital. Will and I also connected partly because we were similar in the fact that my parents were not doing exceptionally well financially at the time either,

making us among the “non-rich” students attending a private school. “Being around that many people who were all so different and came from such different backgrounds, who had the means to afford private educations, really made me want to work my ass off to be able to live a successful life.” Will became fueled by this environment to start exceeding expectations from anyone, whether they were high or low. This became the root of his aspiration to become successful and ultimately disprove the stereotype that is associated with kids in similar situations. Will wanted people to see that no matter where you came from you could still achieve greatness. “I always wanted to exceed everyone’s expectations, but even more importantly, I wanted to do it for myself.”

Because of this attitude and positive approach, Will became an accomplished student, brother, son, friend, and companion and is personally one of the greatest guys I know. I have always been intrigued by Will’s situation and how he has become the person he is, when all I am used to hearing about are the people who go through similar experiences and end up in much worse circumstances. For Will, he turned a bad situation into a useful tool to help him grow overall stronger as a person. “My parents were almost a perfect example of what not to be...” Will said chuckling again, “...and even though I love them both very much, it helped me want to strive for better.” His friends who are his family, along with firefighting, music, and his ability to want to be better than whatever was expected of him are the reason Will is where he is today.

Where is Will Today?

After high school, Will moved onto County College and finished with a 4.0 GPA. He was able to transfer into Rutgers New Brunswick on multiple scholarships and currently holds a 3.0 GPA. However, he dropped out after one year with the anticipation of being hired as a firefighter at his brother's fire company in Maryland, and is still awaiting his interview. He plans on going back to school in the spring if he is not hired by then, and will keep waiting until he gets the call. We still play music together and try to meet any chance we get despite me being at Rowan University. He is still heavily involved with the firehouse in his home town and is currently in driver/operator training.

He and his father are still in the same house down the street from where he grew up, and from time to time, Will helps his father's growing business that recycle used fryer oil from restaurants through a filtering process. Will's mother recently had an episode and

was taken to Maryland to live with his brother temporarily. She has recently returned back to Camden where Will checks in on her from time to time.



References:

Rogers, William G. "Ethnographic Research Interview of Will Rogers."
Personal interview. 2 Nov. 2014.