

# a family history

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from two world wars. Financial tips from a man who experienced the Depression. Adventures Austin has only otherwise seen romanticized in movies.

“He’s really my third parent,” Austin said. “I grew up with him right across the street, I was always over there. I can’t imagine anything different.”

Charles White had lived in his home in Mission Hills for 40 years before his daughter, Madelyn, moved her growing family into the house across the street. There were thoughts of moving him into a nursing home, but PoPo wouldn’t have it. Neither would his family.

He didn’t want to be boxed in. He wanted to be close to his family. There was no further discussion, and PoPo remained in his home across the street.

“Living close to one another, it forms a bond that is much stronger than if you live far apart,” Charles said. “I can see Austin every day, see how he is. It makes it much easier for me to be close with him.”

When his family moved, Austin was a toddler. Charles was 95. It would take five years for Austin to realize that his grandpa’s age was unique.

Back then, PoPo went on a jog each morning. He played the saxophone for Austin’s sister at her 16th birthday party. He hopped on planes and traveled around the country and told lively stories when he returned.

But then Charles turned 100.

“There was this big party at Kansas City Country Club and they gave him all these awards,” Austin said. “I remember thinking that my grandpa was different, that not everyone got the opportunity to know someone who had been through so much.”

After that, Charles’ age was a more noticeable accomplishment for Austin. His PoPo was offered awards, invited to give speeches around the nation.

But for Austin, Charles’ graceful aging wasn’t his greatest feat. For Austin, it was the way he wove together tales from 50 years before with stunning detail. It was the way he lovingly gave decades-old advice, fathered and taught Austin with memories from a century of living.

Rummaging through the attic and basement of PoPo’s home, Austin has unearthed samurai swords and old military uniforms, collected from family members and a cruise to the Orient. Constantly he finds new film and brings it to PoPo, full of questions, exclaiming over the captured moments.

“Mom, PoPo, look!” he’ll say. “Mom, you’re a kid in this one, and—look—that same family picture is on the wall!”

Austin’s favorite story takes PoPo three hours to tell. It involves a young Charlie White and his best friend, Pulitzer-Prize winning author Edgar Snowe, taking a road trip to California. When their car broke down, the pair continued their adventure to the West by hopping onto the back of cargo trains to get to California and return home to Kansas.

“We were just two young boys, taking an adventure,” Charles remembers. “It was just Ed and I, having fun, taking the summer day by day.”

For Austin, the story embodies PoPo — his love for his friends, his ingenuity, his reckless, easy-going confidence. It’s the type that he feels is dying out, a relic from a time that few can remember. Charles isn’t commonplace. The scenes played out before his eyes — wars, depressions, dreams achieved — are becoming faded photographs and History Channel documentaries.

That was life for Charles. He has seen the ties be-

tween past and the present fray. Charles gives Austin that connection, keeping alive memories of a simpler way of living that Austin wants to emulate.

“He always tells me to live simply, for today, because you never know when things will change, when opportunities will be gone,” Austin said. “Back in those days, you cared about your friends, your family. Now everyone is worried about grades and technology. It was simpler back then. Maybe it was better.”

Nothing brings memories back like music.

All it takes for Charles is one line. Jazz. Swing. It takes him back, back to the 20’s when he taught himself to play saxophone, to the 40’s when he toured in the band of a cruise ship to bring jazz to the Orient. It helps him to remember when he sang in quartets with fellow doctors at his hospital, when he met his wife at a local dance party.

Medicine was Charles’ profession. As an anesthesiologist, he saved lives. But music gave him a way to live his own. Over 100 years, he’s seen music progress from jazz to rock to pop, from Sinatra to The Stones to Bieber. He misses the days when music focused on tune, on composition. He listens to vinyls from the past, from the 20s, from the 50s, and it takes him back.

In the last few years of his life, music has done even more. It has connected him to Austin. None of Austin’s family has a passion for music—it took him until middle school to realize that he loved it. The bond that chords and rhythm creates between the pair is special.

Charles often asks Austin to play the piano for him, and they can discuss their love of music, their favorite types, their favorite songs, for hours.

“Music is a way of expression, of expressing life,” Charles said. “Where else can you show someone love or sadness? How else can you do that? It is the best way to express and enjoy life.”

He’s spent a century enjoying life and living for the moment. But in the last ten years, Charles has become less mobile. He stopped traveling and ended his daily jogs. And five months after his 107th birthday, Charles was faced with mortality.

It was a stroke. Minor. But Charles felt that something was different. This was the first major health problem he had experienced since a broken arm five years before.

“He turned to my mom and said, ‘I think this might be terminal,’” Austin said. “We didn’t question it. He’s lived in his body so long, he knows its limits. I think it was the first time we’d really had to think about him not being there anymore.”

The idea was not accompanied by fear. Only acceptance, and a need to share advice, scatter final words.

He tells Austin to cherish his youth. To live for each day, to travel and love and live with joy, so that one day, he can look back on his life with pride.

Charles knows regret. He retells his mistakes to Austin, so that his grandson can learn from them. But mostly, Charles tells Austin about joy, adventure, love. Those are the emotions that he wants Austin to live for, and they are what fill him as he waits for a fate that has taken its time to reach him.

“He keeps telling me, ‘One of these days, an angel is gonna come for me, and I’m not gonna fight it,’” Austin said. “And it’s kinda sad but it’s amazing and almost inspiring. Because that’s how it should be.” That’s how you want it to be.”



Above: Charlie White, 107, sits in his front yard.

►photo courtesy of the Dagleish family

The shelves of his closet stretch to the ceiling and sag under their load. Shoe boxes from the 50s stuffed with strips of dusty film. VHS tapes. Vinyls.

“Mom, does PoPo listen to all these old musicals?”

Sophomore Austin Dagleish sticks his head out of the closet, distracted from a search for 50-year-old pictures by a stack of records.

His mom is perched on the seat of her father’s walker in the corner of the living room. Austin ducks back into the closet, bending over to grab another box of film. He’s looking for a particular box — from his grandfather’s vacation in Mexico — but his search is fruitless.

“What’s he looking for?” Charles White, Austin’s PoPo, asks. He sits in the leather recliner next to Madelyn, crisp button-down neatly tucked into trousers, thinning white hair carefully combed, legs crossed at the ankles.

“Your pictures... Dad.” Madelyn says, raising her voice, taking care to enunciate each consonant so that her dad can hear her words. “The ones... from... Mexico.”

A thin smile plays across PoPo’s lips. The creases in the corners of his eyes deepen, laugh lines more pronounced, as his eyes scroll across the room, through the years.

PoPo doesn’t share the memory. Not at first. Perhaps it’s of Mexico. Or Peru, 1956, where he adopted a pet spider monkey named Willy, sneaking it back to the States through pre-9/11 security. Or when he traveled to Japan and China and gave people newly liberated by World War II their first taste of American music. Or of his teenage days in the Roaring 20s of Kansas City, when jazz held the city in rapture and strict lines of diversity first began to blur.

His vision has slowly faded over the past century, but the memories remain in crisp, whole detail. PoPo doesn’t venture much outside of his neighborhood now, but he can remember days when he traveled the globe. Memories have become the color of his life—greys of the Depression, reds of rising and falling communism, rainbows of the 70s. Sharing them with Austin has become one of his favorite pastimes.

He takes slow, rasping breaths as he recounts snippets from his life.

107 years. There’s a lot to remember.

PoPo smiles again.

“When William and I were in Peru, we ran into these three girls...”

Austin stops his search as PoPo begins.

Austin was raised on stories like this. Life lessons

## TIMELINE

a few of the major events White has lived through

### 1920

Women gain the right to vote in the United States.

### 1925

Hitler publishes *Mein Kampf*.

### 1927

The first movie with talking, “The Jazz Singer”, is released.

### 1934

The Midwest is ravaged by the Dust Bowl.

### 1945

The United States drops an atomic bomb on Japan.

### 1948

The “Big Bang” theory is created.

### 1962

The Cuban Missile Crisis takes place.

### 1969

Neil Armstrong walks on the moon.

### 1981

A woman is appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court for the first time.

### 1990

The Hubble Telescope is launched into space.