Name of Harrodian Student:

Kitty Oborne

Name of Individual:

Elaine Leon

Date of Birth/Death of individual:

21st April 1923

Story:

Elaine Leon, an influential, self-reliant and powerful advocate for her view. My Great Grandmother. She was born in 1923 on the 21st April in South Africa, which at the time was characterized by a complex societal landscape marked by racial segregation and the institutionalization of apartheid policies, shaping the country's trajectory toward a deeply divided and discriminatory system. My great grandmother now lives in Vancouver so I do not often see her. However, growing up, my mother spent every summer with her in Monte Carlo and she played a key role in my mother’s upbringing.

Elaine's formative years unfolded in the urban landscapes of Johannesburg and Cape Town. Her mother, having spent her entire life in Zimbabwe in a stringent Jewish community, adhered to an arranged marriage with a rabbi, leading to profound limitations on all her personal decisions and opportunities. Fate intervened when Elaine's father, following his father's instructions, resided with the couple in Zimbabwe for a period. Love blossomed between Elaine's parents, prompting them to depart from Zimbabwe. Consequently, Elaine's upbringing deviated from orthodoxy, and she found herself distanced from her extended family, as the choices made by her parents led to their exclusion from their communities, as they generated considerable controversy.

While residing in apartheid-era South Africa, Elaine actively engaged in societal and political affairs, advocating for progressive change and equality through her support for the relatively right-wing but liberal Progressive Federal Party. This party fought against the separate development under apartheid which meant that rights were solely based upon race and immensely differed. She dedicated significant time and energy to combating the racial-based apartheid system, promoting education as there was no freedom of press or information in South Africa, meaning that riots and key information from the townships were not reported on. As well as contributing a key role to the Black Sash movement, a non-violent, women-led resistance group highlighting white opposition to apartheid and for most of the 1960’s and 70’s, this was the only consistent white opposition to the government. Alongside her husband, Alan Henry Leon, Elaine co-founded the Claude Leon Foundation, focusing on diverse projects such as water initiatives, medical science programs, engineering fellowships, and support for township communities, reflecting her lifelong commitment to community development and humanitarian causes. These provided her not only with a driving fuel of purpose, but a burning desire to help others and provide solutions not just highlight issues.

My great-grandmother, Elaine, raised two daughters and a son in South Africa. During World War II, her husband, Alan, joined the Allies, leading to a transformative period for Elaine as she navigated the impact of the war. In South Africa, this era reinforced conservative gender roles but also sowed seeds of change in attitudes, contributing to the eventual dismantling of apartheid. Elaine, a lifelong enthusiast of artistic hobbies, frequently crafted embroidered home gifts for the family. Once her children reached adulthood, Elaine and Alan, like many relatives, relocated. The couple moved to Monte Carlo, seeking refuge from South Africa's deteriorating political climate. Their journey continued to London, and today, my great-grandmother resides in Vancouver, embodying a personal story intertwined with historical and cultural shifts.

My great grandmother is the matriarch of the family. Up until her demise into dementia, she was the nucleus of an extended sprawl of family and friends that had become dissipated all over the world. She not only governed and organised the family but kept everyone connected. She is fiercely respected, for her grace and wisdom enriches those who know and love her. Her legacy is continued by my grandmother, the family representative of the Claude Leon Foundation, and her stories are shared amongst us all, keeping her soul present. She fought for her beliefs and guided our family, an indescribably strong woman.