

# Preface

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Our Generation Z journey began during the summer of 2013 as we witnessed yet another incoming first-year class attend our university's summer orientation program. But, 2013 was different – well the students were different. While recruiting for our student leadership programs, as we did each year, we noticed that this cohort of students seemed more engaged in talking with us about involvement, even without their parents encouraging them to do so. And they asked questions about how their participation in our programs could help them engage in social change work, quite different from the resume building and making friends questions we had during previous summers. Knowing that the students seemed different, we needed to figure out what might be going on. What we came across was remarkable – with a little online investigation, we learned that the post-Millennial generation, Generation Z, was entering into young adulthood, with the oldest coming to college that very year. In order to learn more about this generation completely unfamiliar to us, we spent that school year reading every market research report we could get our hands on about this emerging generation of young adults. After a year of attempting to translate these reports to a higher education context, we decided to conduct our own study, which launched in the fall semester in 2014. The data we got back was fascinating, especially responses to the open-ended questions. We then decided to write our first book, *Generation Z Goes to College*.

Since then, we have written two more books, *Generation Z Leads* and this book, along with several scholarly articles. Our more recent publications have incorporated findings from our latest research, the Generation Z Stories Study, which included an analysis of responses to seven open-ended questions from Generation Z college students from 50 colleges and universities. We have also read, read, and read even more – including findings from numerous other studies, market research reports, books, and scholarly articles from other generational authors, and even online pop culture articles. To have a solid grasp of Generation Z, we needed to expand beyond our own research and perspectives to get a more holistic view of this generation.

This journey into better understanding Generation Z has been a fascinating one. What started as a simple interest in a new cohort of college students has turned into a quest for more knowledge to answer the question, “Who is

Generation Z?” This book is our effort to include what we know thus far about this generation. But, before we delve into writing about Generation Z, we wanted to take a moment to share a little about us – the Gen Xer and Millennial who wrote this book.

## Corey, the Gen Xer

The year was 1973 when I was born – a Gen Xer through and through. My parents tell me that they named me Corey to help me better navigate a male-dominated world. Even then, they knew that my name might offer me opportunities that others with more female-associated names might not have.

During my birth year of 1973, while my parents were dancing to the Rolling Stones and Diana Ross, the U.S. ended participation in the Vietnam War, the Supreme Court ruled on *Roe v. Wade*, the Watergate scandal was in full force, and Billie Jean King took on Bobby Riggs to win the epic tennis match, the Battle of the Sexes.<sup>1</sup> My early childhood was situated in the 1970s where *Scooby-Doo* and *Little House on the Prairie* were staples on the TV set. While this era was in the middle of the Cold War, it was another war that captured the attention of many people during that time – Star Wars. We loved our space themes and drank our orange Tang. The 70s were a time when car seats were rare, houses were filled with our parents’ cigarette smoke, and anyone could walk up to the gate at the airport to greet incoming passengers from their Pan Am flight.

Although I was born in the 70s, I consider myself an 80s kid – you couldn’t have enough fluorescent jelly bracelets or banana clips. Michael Jackson and Madonna were icons, and we looked to Molly Ringwald and John Cusack to help us find our way. But, growing up in the 80s was a paradox. In one sense, I felt safe and comforted at school and at home as the Smurfs kept me company on the weekends, and the Girl Scouts kept me busy selling cookies door-to-door. There were no metal detectors in schools, and kids could play outside without an adult as long as they remembered to be home in time for dinner.

While we Gen Xers enjoyed our independence and felt fairly safe from the world’s woes, we were not oblivious. I remember not being allowed to take Tylenol or other medicines for a while until the poisonings stopped, breaking Halloween candy into tiny pieces to make sure there were no blades or needles inside, and never talking to strangers . . . especially ones in vans. Even at my young age, I knew who Adam Walsh was, a young boy around my age who went missing from a mall and later found dead. Although we still played outside and enjoyed our freedoms, we were always looking over our shoulders to make sure we were safe.

Of everything I remember from the 80s, there is one moment that stands out to me and likely for many in Generation X – the explosion of the Challenger Space Shuttle. I was living in Florida at the time where following space shuttle launches was like following the NFL game schedule. The day of the Challenger explosion, I was at school. We watched the event on television, over and over

again. I can still see the images in my head. As a kid, I wasn't sure how to process such a devastating tragedy and am not sure that I ever really did. More than 25 years later, when the space shuttle, Endeavour, was retired in California, I stood outside to watch as it passed through Tucson, Arizona, where I was living. I gathered around with my younger students and colleagues as they cheered and celebrated the space program. But for me, that moment brought back memories of the Challenger tragedy and the many who had sacrificed for scientific discovery.

By the time the 90s came around, I was in high school. I remember watching Channel 1 (the national school news channel) and learning about the Gulf War. As I was preparing to go off to college, I had male friends turning 18 that feared they were going to be sent to war. Thankfully, there was never a draft. But, many in my generation did end up serving during the Gulf War and continued their military service through 9/11. While we weren't a war generation, we certainly did have Gen Xers who served in combat.

During the early 90s, I was in college listening to grunge music and going to the actual library to do homework. I was among the majority of my friends to earn a four-year degree in four years and left college with zero debt because tuition was so low. During college, I voted in my first election – Clinton vs. Bush in 1992. I was thrilled to be able to vote but was deeply saddened when I was issued a provisional ballot because I couldn't get to my assigned precinct. I actually cried that day after I voted, worried that my provisional ballot wouldn't count.

As I graduated college in 1995, a lot was happening. Amazon, eBay, Match.com, and Craigslist were launched.<sup>2</sup> But, 1995 wasn't only about technology. That was the year of the Oklahoma City Bombing and OJ Simpson trial. But, it was also the first year of the birth of Generation Z.

While I can reminisce about all the fun childhood memories I had like playing in my clubhouse, riding my bike, sleepovers with friends, and school dances, it is many of these larger historical moments that have shaped my life . . . and thus shape the way I parent my Generation Z daughter. I have learned to carry on the legacy my parents intended with my name to address injustice. I have tried to provide my daughter the autonomy to live and learn while keeping a watchful eye out for danger. And I try to balance informing her of the realities of the world while protecting her for just a little while longer.

As my childhood and young adulthood have come and gone, I play an important role with Generation Z. First, I must leave the world better off than when I arrived, working toward making the Earth sustainable for the future, eliminating injustice, contributing to a stable economy, and helping our society guarantee that all people are healthy, safe, and secure. I know that I alone will not be able to do these things . . . yet I can do my part and I should do my part. Finally, though, I must give everything I have to parenting my Generation Z daughter. I need to support her, guide her, challenge her, and love her so she is prepared to make the world an even better place for generations to come.

## Meghan, the Millennial

Born in 1990, I can proudly say that I'm a 90s kid. Back-to-school shopping was not complete without picking out my JanSport backpack and filling it with Lisa Frank folders and every color gel pen. In school, I lived for computer class where we raced to finish the Oregon Trail (if our wagon didn't sink crossing a river), and Microsoft Office became second nature. We also had plenty of time set aside for recess to play Red Rover, P.E. to play capture the flag, music class to learn Hot Cross Buns on the recorder, and art class to make paper mâché. The highlight of my Friday night was going with my dad to Blockbuster Video to pick out a movie for the weekend. And I had heated debates with friends over hard-hitting topics of Backstreet Boys vs. N\*SYNC and if Disney Channel was better than Nickelodeon. Making sure my Walkman CD player had a new set of batteries was essential before going on any family road trip to make sure I could listen to the burned CD I thoughtfully curated.

My first Internet experiences included the sound of the AOL dial-up tone as I patiently waited to log into a world that allowed me to connect with my friends through Instant Messenger. My first experience learning HTML coding and using a social media site was on Myspace, where I spent hours making sure the fonts and colors were just right and I wasn't offending anyone with my Top 8 friend selections. As I prepared to graduate from high school, my older friends in college clued me into this new site called Facebook, and I couldn't wait to get my college-associated email address so I could set up my profile.

Growing up, I had no shortage of after-school activities to fill my time. My parents were very involved and beyond supportive of my extracurricular activities and academic pursuits. They kept me focused on my future and made sure I was prepared for college. When I started college in 2008, I knew I was going to have to take out student loans to pay for school but didn't understand how much and just how long it would take to actually pay back those loans. I also wasn't completely sure of my career plans but assumed I had time to figure that out later. Under my young Millennial optimism, I was hopeful that paying off my student loans would be easy after I started my career but found that my debt would be with me much longer than I anticipated. I was fortunate to go to graduate school and find employment in my field, but many of my peers experienced having to work jobs for which they were overeducated and underpaid. While generations before mine saw buying a home or car as a first major financial milestone, getting out of personal or educational debt is something many in my generation pine after even today.

There are a few moments from my childhood and adolescence that I'll never forget. I was in third grade when the Columbine shooting occurred. I'll never forget my teacher explaining to us what happened and trying to understand at the age of nine why someone would do that to other students or let that happen in their school. A place I had always felt was fun and safe suddenly made me feel a little uneasy. A few years later, I was in the 6th grade when 9/11 happened. I vividly

remember waking up and knowing something was wrong as I heard my mom speaking on the phone in a concerned voice. We lived on the West Coast and my oldest brother had been driving near the Pentagon that morning. My mom let me turn on the television to watch the news and see what had happened, which we never did before school. When I got to school that day, the news was still being played. Usually having the TV on in class meant we were watching a movie for a lesson or because it was raining. The TV stayed on all day, and my teacher tried to help his class of 11 year-olds grapple with what happened as the news came out. These events stand out to me as being pivotal to many in my generation in how we reflect on the era in which we grew up.

Today, I joke that I was a 90s kid and grew up to be a walking, talking Millennial stereotype. My “helicopter” parents have become some of my closest friends. I care far more about investing in an experience, like traveling or going to a concert, rather than buying more stuff. I identify as a digital “nomad” and feel comfortable learning new technology and social media platforms. As a young adult and professional, I’ve experienced a fair share of discussion and criticism about my own generation. It sometimes feels like people’s gut reaction to the word “Millennial” is to roll their eyes. But I never understood the reason until I started researching generations. It’s easy to see a group of people doing something different from you and automatically write that off as wrong and eye-roll worthy. My reaction to Generation Z is exactly the opposite of eye rolling. I work to better understand Generation Z and learn what makes them unique. I’m not afraid of what makes them different from me, my Millennial peers, and those in older generations. Instead, I’m fascinated with learning more about who they are. I’ve been a researcher, interviewer, instructor, facilitator, supervisor, advisor, mentor, friend, babysitter, and aunt to members of this generational cohort. And, in every one of these settings in which I get to hang out with Generation Z, I witness something that makes this generation awesomely unique and makes me hopeful for the future.

## Notes

- 1 The People History. (2018). *What happened in 1973: Important news and events, key technology and popular culture*. Retrieved from [www.thepeoplehistory.com/1973.html](http://www.thepeoplehistory.com/1973.html)
- 2 Pew Research Center. (2018b). *World wide web timeline*. Retrieved from [www.pewinternet.org/2014/03/11/world-wide-web-timeline/](http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/03/11/world-wide-web-timeline/)