Gordon Flett came across the term “mattering” as a psychology graduate student. Sitting at his desk in 1987, poring over a textbook, “I immediately knew what mattering was,” he said.

He remembered visiting his grandmother during the summer as a child and taking trips to the insulation plant where she managed the cafeteria. She hung on his every word, and her co-workers treated him like royalty. Recalling the experience, he could almost taste the Jell-O and chocolate milk.

A few years later, the concept landed even closer to home. He was struggling to find research subjects for his master’s thesis and panic was rising. His mother, who lived nearby, was also facing a difficult moment; her marriage was falling apart.