Parent Care: Almost 100 and it's still a beautiful life

by Marsha_Kay_Seff

She was 98 and four months. Doris told me when she phoned asking about local transportation from her San Diego County home.

Sure, she still drives. Her license is good until she's 101, but she needed to return some hearing aids and didn't want to drive across town.

I offered to help if she'd talk with me first about what I hope will be my future - a ripe old age with good health and independence.

Doris (no last name for obvious reasons) has outlived a husband of 53 years. And two pacemakers. "I just got my third, and I hope it lasts at least five years."

The nonagenarian lives alone in a three-bedroom house in a comfortable neighborhood. "We were very careful with our money. When we got married, my husband made $5 a week, and we still saved. We paid cash for this house in 1977."

Her son, a Chicagoan, has multiple sclerosis and uses a wheelchair. "He doesn't take care of me; I take care of him."

When I showed up at Doris' place, I asked to see her driver's license, just to make sure. Yes, she is indeed 98 and is a legal driver.

What keeps her so young?

"I don't think I'm young," said the 4-foot-10-inch grandmother of two. But, she pointed out, she has good genes. Her mom lived to 100 and her grandmother to 103.

Doris doesn't have pain anywhere and doesn't need a cane. "What for? I walk," she said, showing me. She shuffles for the first few steps when she stands, just to get her balance. Then she walks as well as I do.

She reads the newspaper daily and doesn't need glasses, she boasted, offering to read the phone number of the hearing-aid office for me. She does need hearing aids, but she hasn't been happy with the newfangled ones.

She cooks for herself in quantity and does her own housekeeping. "You are what you eat and I always ate well," she said. "I love sweets, but I allow myself only one piece at a time."

When she spills something, she mops it up. "I believe you do it yourself. I don't expect people to cater to me."

Though she has a gardener, she likes to check out her hillside herself.

Not a good idea, I told her. But she only laughed.

She tries to walk daily. Because her neighborhood is hilly, she does her mile at a shopping center. Even if she doesn't do that, she said, she plans one activity every day.

Yes, she does get lonely. She has a few friends, "But they're not very interesting. I traveled; I worked for the airlines. A lot of older women didn't do anything except raise kids." Sometimes she goes to the senior center. "But there are too many old people there. They depress me."

I suggested she become a mentor at an elementary school. She's afraid they wouldn't want someone so old. I tell her she's wrong; they'd love her.

Doris had two boyfriends who wanted to marry her, but she wasn't interested. "I'm not a toy." Right now, she's alone. She'd love to find a man with a car who would accompany her to the theater. "Of course, I'd pay my own way. If there's a nice guy, tell him to call me."

Why not consider a live-in companion, I asked. "I will when I get older," she promised. How about a personal security device? "I know, I know." She did promise to order one.

Why do other people seem to get old at a much younger age, I asked, hoping to gain more wisdom.

"Don't ask me," she laughed. "If I knew, I'd make money."

Her best advice: "Just do everything."

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