

Parent Care: Century mark is a milestone for the active

by Marsha_Kay_Seff

American centenarians are getting to be as common as designer jeans.

But an e-mail from geriatric care manager Kathy Randall about 103-year-old Sophia "Sherry" Walsh caught my attention. "She's taught me so much about life, honor, respect and dignity."

After recuperating from a fractured hip, then a fractured femur, the former Smith College English professor returned to Casa de Manana in La Jolla, Calif. There, she worked out daily on an elliptical machine.

After a bout of bronchitis, the now-104-year-old has decided to skip the fitness room. But that's her only concession. In fact, hospice recently decided she's not yet ready for its services.

In full makeup, Sherry spends her days at her desk admiring the ocean view, watching TV with an infrared hearing device, playing Scrabble, taking art classes, "reading" dozens of talking books and perusing the newspaper with a magnifying glass. And she's recently learned how to drive an electric scooter, which she complains is too slow.

In between, she dreams - "very good dreams" about her life and the friends who have gone before her.

With the help of caregiver Lucy Fajardo, Sherry makes it to all three meals in the dining room. She snacks on Cheerios. Perhaps this "breakfast of champions," I tease, will hire her for a commercial.

A widow, married once, Sherry has a 60-year-old son, two grandchildren and a great-grandchild.

What keeps her young?

She smiles with a full set of her own teeth. "I didn't think I was so young."

Her advice for a life well-lived: "Do what you like to do, but do it well. Don't complain about your condition; don't complain in general. And don't anticipate bad things."

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On a younger note, 86-year-old Hilda Pierce of La Jolla just published her first book, titled "Hilda, A True Story of Terror, Tears and Triumph."

She realizes self-publishing isn't as prestigious as landing one of the big houses, but says she didn't want to waste time pounding the sidewalks.

Her story begins in Vienna, Austria, in May 1938. At 16, Hilda says, she stood just 10 feet from Hitler, after he had invaded her birthplace. The saga includes her escape to England and her trip to New York in 1939 on a ship, she says, that was attacked by German subs.

Her signings have included Classic Residence by Hyatt, where she lives, and Tecate's Rancho La Puerta, where she met her husband, Herman Slutzky. She's outlived three others. "Every one of my husbands was a spectacular man."

She started her book in the waiting room at Mayo Clinic, where she had gone for a chronic cough. She finished two years later on her computer.

Meantime, Hilda is an accomplished oil painter. Her apartment is full of her work, and she did a 12-foot mural for the cancer center at University of California, San Diego's Thorton Hospital. She says Carnival Cruise Lines even has her works hanging on some of its ships. When management told her it was looking for a better-known artist, she answered, "Anyone can hire Picasso, but you can make me Picasso."

She writes: "All of my experiences and all my notions of right and wrong, of justice, and compassion, and my passionate love and pride of my adopted country, America, helped to build my worldview

"An artist's most precious quality is curiosity. It has kept me young for many years, kept me searching, experimenting and never being complacent."

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