

Parent Care: Centenarian still going strong

by Marsha Kay Seff

It's one thing when a young man offers you a seat. It's quite another when a female centenarian offers you one.

But when we met, 101-year-old "Sister" Gertrude Holt stood up from her wheelchair and suggested that I sit there instead.

As I chatted with her and two of her friends from Mount Zion Church, I realized that everything about the woman - with hardly a wrinkle - is surprising. Not the least of which is the fact that, though she doesn't have children, she's seldom alone at Reo Vista Healthcare Center in San Diego. In addition to a niece who visits often and buys and washes her clothes, there are a slew of church ladies more than happy to pitch in to help.

"You ought to see people getting over me," Sister Holt says. "I'm not lonely."

SISTER SECRET - Dorothy Brazley, left, and Faye Hayslett, right, visit their friend Gertrude Holt. CNS Photo by Scott Linnett.

One friend, Dorothy Brazley, 72, called to invite me to visit their "church mother." She showed up with cookies from her own 92-year-old mom. Faye Hayslett, another 72-year-old church member, came as well.

The two women have known Sister Holt since the 1950s. Hayslett, the grandmother of seven, is a retired preschool teacher who still teaches Sunday school. She visits weekly, often braiding her friend's hair. Brazley, a retired teacher with 13 great-grandchildren, alternates her visits with some of the other parishioners.

"I come because I love her," Brazley says.

Like Sister Holt I don't have children, so it was reassuring to discover there are people who enjoy looking out for an older woman who has outlived most of her family.

I asked how she keeps everyone coming back.

"If you are going to be loved, you have to be friendly to people you meet," Sister Holt says. "I don't meet any strangers; we're all God's children."

Hayslett explains, "She always sees the good in everyone; I've never heard her say a negative word.

"She just lifts everybody's spirits. If you're down and out, all you got to do is go to Sister Holt's room. She's an inspiration."

When residents are ill, Sister Holts takes their hands and prays with them and their families. She says she helps care for her roommates, giving them water or calling a nurse for help. Sister Holt says she's outlived five roommates.

"Jesus is teaching me to take care of myself," says Sister Holt.

On the wall of her three-bed room are awards from the skilled-nursing facility for "best-dressed" and "best dancer."

When we met, she was wearing stockings, a black skirt and white blouse. She had a red silk flower on her left wrist. And she showed me how she dances from her wheelchair. Actually, she can walk with the help of a walker.

From Louisiana, Sister Holt once worked on the plantations, picking cotton and cleaning houses. She was married three times, losing No. 3 in 1958.

One of her favorite activities is watching baseball, especially the San Diego Padres. When they have a game, she puts on her Padres cap and sits in front of her TV.

It's obvious that the centenarian continues to be in charge of her life. When she met the new cook, Sister Holt informed her, "I like brownies. No nuts."

Though she no longer gets to go to church, she still reads the Bible. When Hayslett visits, she brings Sunday School books, the church bulletin and the obituaries.

"It's mission work," says Hayslett. "We as Christians are supposed to look after each other. This is the most rewarding thing I do."

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