

Successful Aging: The Life of a Young 93-year-old Woman

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Received: 09August 2017; **Accepted:** 04 September 2017

Citation: Judith A. Williams. Successful Aging: The Life of a Young 93-year-old Woman. Nur Primary Care. 2017; 1(4): 1-3.

Introduction

“Remember me as a good person” are the unadorned words that 93-year-old Theresa Paluka (great-aunt of my husband) expresses before the completion of an interview on January 29th, 2009. For her, the foundation for her successful aging is to “Avoid abusing my body... Good food... Good's day work... Avoid getting into trouble... Thanking God... and socializing in your community.” Other researchers have revealed similar beliefs and practices that Theresa expresses.

Hooyman and Kiyak [1], and Rowe and Kahn [2], cite different researchers' definitions of successful aging as having functional physical health, maintaining active exercise, stimulating cognition to enhance high performance, adapting effectively to challenges of life, and maintaining self-efficacy. In the research conducted by Jang, Choi, and Kim [3], they note that a person's educational level was an important factor in physical and mental functioning. Another researcher, Angel [4], found that cultural and social class had an impact on successful aging. Driscoll et al. [5], researched sleep patterns, quality and successful aging and found that sleep quality and daytime alertness are all important aspects of successful aging.

Successful aging is implementing an effective and realistic plan of action that addresses the physical, mental, spiritual, and social aspects of your life. It might start with waking up each morning with a smile on one's face thanking your “Higher Power” for another day on earth. A practical plan of action that incorporates a stimulation of your physical body and cognitive functions; an awareness and gratification of completed accomplishments; and a positive and valuable interaction with your family, friends, community and society. It ends at night with a reflection of the strengths and weaknesses of the day's functions, accomplishments, and interactions, as well as, thanking your “Higher Power” for the day of strength and stamina to stand on one's feet. Theresa expressed a similar

plan of action as she tackles each day of life.

For Theresa, her life began on January 9th in the year of 1916. She was born in Tobyhanna in a “plain, simple and small boarding house next to ice house #3” once located on the property of the Tobyhanna State Park. She lived there until 1918 which then her parents and siblings moved “to town” (Tobyhanna) on Church Street in a double home. In 1924, the family bought property and moved to the “Paluka Ranch” of three acres (sign still present at the entrance to the property).

Her parents were born in Austria-Hungary (now Czechoslovakia). They came to the United States in 1888. She has very little knowledge of her ancestry because she states, “we didn't ask a lot of questions.” According to Theresa, her parents spoke very little about their lives in Austria-Hungary but she acquired the German dialect specific to her ancestry roots. At present, the expertise for this language is slipping away because Theresa no longer has family or friends that can speak that dialect. Her tone of voice displays the loss of losing this cognitive skill and a piece of culture which, according to Angel [4], could have a negative effect on successful aging.

Theresa's mother took care of the family and her father worked at the “Ice House #3” until retirement (unable to recall the exact date). Theresa could not recall the name of the ice company that her father worked at but was very specific in her details about the cutting of ice in the winter, the storage of the ice in the icehouses, and the transportation of the ice to New York in the summer. Here her sharp cognitive ability shines with the details she reiterates about the cutting of the ice.

Theresa had three brothers - John, Andrew (died at ten months, unknown cause), George; and four sisters - Mary, Anna, Helen and

Julia. Theresa was the youngest of all the siblings. Only her sister Julia and she were able to graduate from high school. Most of the siblings lived in Pennsylvania, which allowed continuous bonding to occur throughout the years. The socialization that remains throughout the years with family has a significant bearing on the successful aging of Theresa

As a child, Theresa played house most of the time with her friends and siblings. She states, “no one got in trouble” because we stayed within our community, attended dances, played shuffleboard, and “never made enemies.” Her best memories are those being with her friends as a child and adult. For Theresa socialization at an early age and throughout her life was very important. The loss of her driving privilege at the age of 88 interfered with her ability for active socialization with her remaining friends.

Theresa attended Coolbaugh School for elementary education. She verbalizes that elementary grades were “grouped”, for example, first and second grade was in the same classroom and taught by one teacher. She joked about the outside “Johns” that she had to utilize during the winter months. Her educational opportunities continued when she attended the Coolbaugh Township Consolidated High School and graduated in 1933. For three years, she floundered until she came to realize that her calling was to “become a nurse.” The opportunity to attend Sacred Heart Hospital School of Nursing, in Allentown, Pennsylvania was a reality. She completed the nursing program in 1938 and remained in the area working at various health care institutions as a registered nurse. Her nursing career of 48 years encompassed a variety of health care settings from acute care, operating room, and eventually to occupational nursing. Her educational level and expanded work history support the research conducted by Jang, Choi, and Kim on the positive correlation between higher education and successful aging [3].

Theresa vividly tells me about returning to the Tobyhanna area within three years of graduation to work at the private hospital of Dr. Rosencrance located in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania. During this time, Theresa noted that the facility “cared for everyone” – young and old. Her long-term memory excels as she reiterates all of the names of the nurses that worked at the private hospital demonstrating the keen cognition of this 93-year-old woman again.

When asked about the “Great Depression” which lasted from 1929 to around 1939 [6], Theresa commented that she probably was going to school. She commented that her father was a “good provider” and always took care of his family. They always had “food on the table” and “clean clothes” to wear. The practices of “good food” and health practices remain an active ritual in Theresa’s life. At her age, she still manages to tend to her garden, cook for herself, perform housekeeping duties, and attend to her bills. The skeletal/muscular problems and respiratory status (smoker for

over 70 years) hinder her mobility to walk long distances. This unhealthy practice of smoking probably will prevent Theresa from becoming the first centenarian in her family.

Theresa revealed what her definition of “successful aging” meant to her. She stated that, “I give thanks every morning to the Lord for this old house, and for my parents giving me the life I had.” Theresa remarks that aging tends to “creep up” on you and before you know it, you are “old.” Her strong spiritual beliefs and practices have contributed to her successful aging.

“I have done what I wanted to do with no regrets” were her parting words to me. It is obvious that Theresa is displaying the psychosocial stage - Ego Integrity versus Despair [1]. She reviews her life-career and determines that she has accomplished her goals. She displays no remorse for her life and looks forward to her death. Her strong Catholic beliefs provide her the comfort and peace as death becomes imminent.

Conclusion

In conclusion, interviewing this dynamic woman provided a different perspective about the uniqueness of all aging individuals who have special histories and life experiences. One comes away with an attitude and understanding to encourage and provide opportunities for the elderly to obtain full potential of physical, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual functions for each elderly individual to successfully age [7]. Unfortunately, Theresa Paluka’s life ended unexpectedly surrounded by the love of her remaining family members in a Hospice unit.

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