

## Remember Mother's Day: Lessons From A Grandmother

By CHELSEA J. CARTER

Associated Press Writer

COLUSA, Calif. (AP) --- Lucille Strohlein closed her eyes, recalling the story:

She sat near the hospital bed, whispering to her husband. They were private words --- words of love, of faith, of farewell. She talked to him for hours, recalling their life together.

Then, after 65 years of marriage, he was gone.

Sometime after, she isn't really sure when, she put his worn leather wallet in her purse. There wasn't anything in it, really. A few pictures and pieces of paper.

She carried it with her for years.

"I don't know why I did that. I just did," she said later. "It just made me feel better. Sometimes you have to do things that make you feel better."

And there it was \_ my grandmother's advice about heartbreak, couched in her story of love and loss. She was telling me, in the way only she can, to do something that made me feel better.

At 94, my grandmother has a lifetime of stories \_ and many are like this one, plain and direct but ending with a message that you store away. She'll surely have more stories when I call her for Mother's Day.

Listen long enough, my mother once told me, and you can find lessons in them all.

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People everywhere tell stories over drinks or meals.

With my grandmother, they're often told over a cup of instant coffee while sitting at her kitchen table. It's a small room in her mobile home in a sleepy, small Northern California town. Here, my grandmother has taken me back in time.

I never knew her young. In my memory, she has always been "Gramma" with her deep wrinkles and worn hands. But when she talks about her life, there is youthful understanding. You can hear it in her story about earrings:

Coming of age during the Great Depression, she said women didn't pierce their ears. That is, not if you wanted to be respectable. Only more "worldly women" did that, she said.

It was the same, she says, with women wearing pants to work. And later jeans. You just didn't.

But over time, she watched as new generations broke down the stigmas.

First, her daughter got her ears pierced. Then her granddaughter.

Even then, my grandmother waited.

She waited until she retired. She no longer had to work, no longer had to conform to a workplace dress code, she said.

"I waited until I didn't see a reason not to," she said.

It took me awhile to understand it wasn't really a story about earrings. She was offering advice to a teenager debating whether to get a tattoo because all her friends were getting them.

Her veiled advice: Will you regret it?

Years later, after I took her advice and waited, my grandmother was one of the first to inspect the artwork.

"Well, let's see what all the fuss is about," she said.

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My grandmother has seen the world change \_ from carriages to cars, from ice boxes to refrigerators, from gas stoves to microwave ovens.

She marvels at the speed of computers, space travel and those "talking cars," as she calls them, that announce when a door is open or when the lights are on.

"Can you believe that?" she says about some new technological marvel.

But the more things change, the more they seem to stay the same at my grandmother's place. The carpet has been replaced several times. So has some of the furniture. But the feel, that thing that makes it home, is still there.

As a journalist, bouncing from one location to another, home is sometimes an elusive place for me. My grandmother has watched me make many moves, and for years she and my grandfather followed my movements and my far-flung story assignments on maps.

She followed them until she couldn't see anymore: Macular degeneration has now taken most of her eyesight.

Now she follows my moves by listening and imagining all the places, the stories.

Recently, she started to get rid of some of her belongings, clearing out closets and boxes.

"All of this is just stuff. Old stuff," she says, waving her hands at things to be discarded.

Years ago, my grandparents lived in a house in the Bay Area. When they retired, they sold it and moved into the mobile home in this small community. It was manageable, livable for a couple facing their twilight years.

Not too long ago, she told me she decided to replace my grandfather's reclining chair in the living room. It was broken and the blue fabric was fading.

"But Gramma, I love that chair. It reminds me of Grampa," I told her over the phone.

She dismissed my complaint. "It's just stuff," she said.

Shopping for a new chair, she said she sat in more than she can count.

In the end, she picked a cushioned, beige recliner that felt a lot like my grandfather's old chair. And it looked a little like it too. And she put in the same place as the old one.

Sitting in it, I could still think of my grandfather.

It wasn't the chair that reminded you of him, she told me later. She was right. It was the memory of him in that chair, a memory I still have.

Recently, she recounted that story to me after a particularly difficult move where many of my belongings were damaged or destroyed.

"It's just stuff," she said wiping away my tears. "What can't you replace?"

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Age, my grandmother says, is a state of mind.

It seems strange to hear that from a woman who is, as she likes to say, "pushing 95."

But it's true.

She rides her three-wheel cycle through the mobile home park delivering rent notices. She still rakes leaves in the fall. She wades into deep puddles to unclog the street drains after particularly bad rainstorms.

And every month, she collects the rent checks for the mobile home park, balances the books and writes the deposit.

And she does this all despite undeniable signs of aging.

Besides the macular degeneration, she has had knee replacement surgery. And last month, she had a pacemaker, which she has taken to calling her "ticker," put in to regulate her heartbeat.

It was a scary moment for the family.

Over the phone, she told me about the Medivac flight to the University of California, Davis, medical center. She told me about the tests, about the "new fangled machines" that she had never seen before. She told about the doctors and the many male nurses.

"Those boys were so nice. They just let me tease them and laugh with them. I had so much fun," she said.

Fun?

Yes, fun, she says.

I'm still trying to figure out what her advice is with that story. Maybe it has something to do with male nurses.

Or maybe she's trying to tell me to enjoy every minute of life.

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## About the Author

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