

Millie Bayha Milwaukee Journal Sentinel November 13 2010
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In My Opinion

She's ready to light up a party, with 106 candles

Let's see. Her calendar's a bit full. There's daily exercise, ceramics, weekly yoga, twice-a-week church services, occasional club activities with the 90s-plus group, the lifelong learning classes, her beloved bingo, arts and crafts, Friday night movie, time set aside to read the daily newspaper.

Is there room for a birthday party?

Millie Bayha turns 106 Monday. As the guest of honor at a birthday celebration thrown by The Arboretum senior retirement center in Menomonee Falls where she lives, she'll be the life of the party.

Remarkably fit for her age — mentally and physically — Millie was asked the inevitable question: What's your secret?

"I don't know the secret," she said this week, "but I was blessed with good health."

Good health, an active lifestyle, and a pleasant, optimistic disposition are perhaps all part of Millie's



Millie Bayha (center) takes an exercise class with Geri Simanok (left) and Maxine Listwan at The Arboretum senior retirement center in Menomonee Falls on Nov. 4. Bayha, who turns 106 Monday, keeps active with yoga, arts and crafts, learning classes and bingo.

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WALKER

Preparing to blow out her 106 candles

secret, said Thea Vorass, lifestyle director at The Arboretum.

"She has a wonderful outlook on life," Vorass said. "She always is positive."

Add to that her willingness to try new things and to keep on learning, and this centenarian is one of the more endearing seniors you'll meet.

At her Monday morning exercise class this week, Millie was doing the "Chicken Dance" — though understandably slower — with a couple dozen other residents a decade or two her junior. She tugged a yellow stretchy-band for arm and core strength. She leaned to the left and leaned to the right.

Daily exercise is important to her, but so is participating in many of the other activities organized for residents at The Arboretum.

"I think if they're having the entertainment for us, we should take advantage of it," she said. "I've been happy here. I've had good care and good health."

She passes, though, on trips to the casino because "I think I'm too Scotch and I don't want to put my money in the slot machines and lose

it."

Millie grew up in southern Illinois, married Ben Bayha — a one-time Milwaukee boy who was an all-city tackle for Washington High School in the early 1920s — and was college educated as an elementary school teacher, a job she held in Berwyn, Ill., for 35 years, retiring at age 65.

After retirement, the couple traveled widely and spent winters in Florida, finally settling at The Arboretum, close to their only son, Bob, of Brown Deer 13 years ago. Ben died in 1999.

How rare is she?

Centenarians — and relatively active ones, at that — are a growing category in the population. No one's come up with a precise count, but a 1999 Census Bureau report estimated there were 38,000 in 1990 while the Social Security Administration put the number at 29,000.

Wisconsin Social Security Administration offices visually confirmed centenarians 103 and older who were getting benefits this summer, and according to Steve Kryscio with the Milwaukee and Waukesha offices, who personally visited Millie, the statewide count totaled 209.

About 1 in 5 million Americans reach age 110, experts say, equating to about 62 so-called "super centenarians" based on a current U.S. population of 310 million.

Somewhere between the tens of thousands and the dozens, there's Millie and her 106th birthday party.

A few years ago, I wrote about Wisconsin's then-oldest person, "super centenarian" Florence Busch of Waukesha, who died at age 112 years and 161 days in January



FAMILY PHOTO

Millie Bayha taught at an elementary school in Berwyn, Ill., for 35 years.

2009. At that time, no other Wisconsin person 110 or older was known to the Los Angeles-based Gerontology Research Group, which tracks such things.

Three U.S. citizens, all 114, top the current list of oldest living persons.

Bob Bayha, like his mother and her mother, is a retired teacher, having worked 34 years at Milwaukee Public Schools. He's married to a retired Brown Deer teacher, and their two children are teachers.

"My mom and dad said they were going to be happy to see their grandkids graduate from high school," he said. His mother has not only seen that, but watched them graduate from college and marry.

He called his mother "a joy" — "never mean to me except ..."

Millie Bayha finished his sentence with a chuckle: "When you needed it."

Bob Bayha uses his technology teaching expertise to help his mom cope with inconveniences of age. He's rigged up a handy light switch, remote controls, batteries and the rest to help with some short-term forgetfulness. A list of her often-asked questions — with answers — is near her favorite chair.

When she was hospitalized a few years back with pneumonia, it was the first time since she was 40 and giving birth to her son.

Millie learned to use the computer, with one set up in her den and Arboretum classes to prompt her, when she was 95. She used it then, but said she doesn't really need it so doesn't use one now.

The march of time and history spanning Millie Bayha's life, beginning in 1904, has covered relentless change and events, from her father's crank-start roadster she learned to drive as a teenager to space flight, from the invention of television to the Internet.

Does anything cease to amaze you anymore? I asked her.

"No," she said succinctly. "That's progress."

And so is another birthday.

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