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Aspects of Aging
July 20, 1993

Excellent presentation.
(see comments
on back of last
page.)

"Well, it's getting hot out here," Karen said. Then she took a drink of my ice water. "if it's one thing that I've learned from life, it's never to put things off. My husband and I were going to go on a trip to Canada but we put it off. We decided that we would go next year but he died that following spring. Talk about regrets. My children want to go white water rafting so we are going to spend ten days doing just that. I don't put things off any more."

She wiped the sweat off of her forehead so I thanked her for her time and for sharing her memories with me. I feel much closer to Karen now that I know her better. I always liked her, but she's more than just a nice lady now. She's a friend.

Very good.

Introduction:

Karen [REDACTED] is sixty-three years old. With permission of Dr. Salmon, I interviewed her even though she wasn't quite sixty-five. Karen is a lady that rides at my horseback riding stable. I've always admired her spunk and friendliness. My reason for interviewing her was to get to know her better as a person and to learn the history of her childhood to current times. I really enjoyed interviewing her and I made a friend out of it.

*Good
introduction*

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is needed.*

The sun was hot and beating down. It was ninety-six degrees, but it still didn't stop sixty-three year old Karen [REDACTED] from standing outside and letting her beautiful gray Arabian mare graze in the grass.

I met her with a jug of ice water for the two of us. I told her if it gets too hot for us, that we could go inside to do the interview, but she said "Oh no, I like it out here. Even though its hot, its still nice to be out with my horse." I told her to help herself to some water if she wanted to, she thanked me and we started the interview.

Karen talked with bubbling enthusiasm as she started filling me in right away with her memories of her past. She was born in 1930, during the Great Depression. She was the youngest of three children and lived in rural Pennsylvania. They lived with aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews all under one roof. She said none of them had anything so they never realized that they were extremely poor. They shared what they had and had a pretty good time doing it.

Things did get desperate to the point where her Dad burned down the family house in order to collect some insurance money, however, that did not work. He only spent a couple of days in jail though, "during those times, they forgave a lot in the way of arson, theft, and things like that". Karen asked me to turn off the recorder for a second so she could walk up to her horse, Silk, because she looked as if she was going to run off toward something in the pasture that had caught her eye. Karen allowed Silk to graze freely while she stayed just a few feet away.

Karen asked me to turn the recorder back on and proceeded to reminisce about how people helped each other out during those tough times. "We had help from people called the 'Gray ladies'. They brought in fresh orange juice. Since we lived in the rural countryside, we could get fresh eggs, butter and dairy products. Occasionally somebody would slaughter a cow and we would get our beef that way." She hesitated for a moment so I asked her who the gray ladies were. She said that they were a charitable organization much like some of the charitable organizations of today. They went around to the rural areas to see if they could help as many people as they could. The rural areas were really hard hit, there were no jobs, no money, and you ate what you could raise yourself.

"But in the meantime, my Dad, who was born in this country while the rest of his family was born in Croatia...", she hesitated for a moment, "my Dad was very ambitious. He had to leave school in the eighth grade to go to work in the steel mills of Pennsylvania. He was very young and he decided that he never wanted to do that again, so when he could, he quit the steel mill and got another job that allowed him to finish high school. After that he went to MIT and graduated and finally became an executive at Westinghouse International. Every year we moved from state to state until

Very impressive achievement!!

he found a place where he wanted to raise his family. Finally, we ended up on Long Island, NY." Karen said she was getting hot so we decided to continue the interview on another day.

Our next meeting, Karen started right into the interview, "My independence comes from the way my mother raised both my sister and me, and of course my brother too. But back in the thirties, she was what I called the original independent woman. She was determined that we girls were going to get a college education. That was a lot to think about in those days. She raised us to be independent thinking and to act on our own instincts, and to do good in school. She pushed all of us to go to college, which we all did. If we brought home bad grades, we were encouraged to work harder and study harder. We were proud of our grades and we knew that good grades were an important part of life. Don't forget, there was no television. We had a radio which we listened to faithfully. In fact, that's where I got my musical background. Every Saturday afternoon, we listened to the opera theatre at Times Square, an old radio program. We stayed glued to the radio for a couple of hours."

Karen laughed and then said "we had chores to do, I mean real chores. Not make believe ones or the kind you get allowance for. I mean real chores. It was our business to do and we got them done." We laughed together.

"Anyway, I thought growing up was a lot of fun. I loved school. I loved the fact that I could make decisions and I seemed to make the right ones most of the time. I loved high school in particular. Because of my mother, my brother, sister and I joined everything. We joined the orchestra, the Drama club, the straight A society, and all of those things. We never stayed at home after school or we would be bored stiff. I can't understand anybody saying that they hate school. That's too impossible for me." We both laughed again.

"I met my husband-to-be at Oklahoma State University. We met in February and got married in August. He was late for our wedding which we had in Kansas City. He was late because of the massive flood in 1953." I asked her if it was much worse than this one and she replied "Oh yes, much worse. He worked for Colgate which had a huge building where he worked on the second floor. They had to evacuate the building by boat and that's why he was late to the wedding ceremony." She laughed.

I replied, "Oh my gosh. Well, I guess you can understand that."

"Well, I forgave him."

"Yeah, since he came by boat." We both laughed and continued to talk about the flood, Finally deciding to continue our talk later.

The next time we met, she was grazing her horse again. It was another hot day. We sat down on the picnic table and watched Silk graze happily on the grass. She immediately started talking right

where she left off the last time we met. "It was a year after we were married that my first son was born. I've had five children. Their names are Mark, Lynn, Richard, Robert, and Valerie. Val was my surprise because I was thirty-nine when I had her." She laughed. "Everything is never always good times and fun and everything. I lost my first son in 1970, he was killed, hit by a car and killed. I was four and a half months pregnant with Valerie."

I sadly replied "Oh no."

Karen sadly but confidently replied, "Oh yes, that's what you call a hard time."

"How old was your son?" I asked.

"He was just eighteen years old. It was devastating. Those kind of things can split a family apart, you know. You are so busy grieving yourself that you don't have room for others."

"Especially being pregnant, it had to be hard." I replied.

"Well, it actually turned out to be the best thing that ever happened because when she was born, you've got a wonderful new baby to take care of. I poured all of this extra care into Valerie. I had my other kids that were older too, ten, thirteen and fifteen. Oh and they loved her. Well, we got through it as a family but it really was a hard time.

I told her about my brother-in-law who was killed in a car accident. "It pulled the family apart. You would think that the family would pull closer but they didn't. Everybody started fighting and everything. Now they are starting to talk again."

Karen said "Yeah, Jim and I, that was one time in our life that we just couldn't seem to talk to each other. It was just one of those strange things. Of course, we were married for around forty years. He died just last year. It was so sudden and unexpected. So I have been learning to live by myself for the last year and a half."

"That's kind of an adjustment." I responded.

"Yes, it sure is. But I have had some real neat jobs over the years. I worked for O.A.T.S., that's Older Adult Transportation Services."

"Oh yeah, we studied about them in school." I said.

"Yes, they are great. I drove a real big wheel chair van. You know I'm only 5' 4." She laughed. "And I drove a big wheel chair van. But I think that was the best five years that I ever spent at a job because you learn to do more for people. You learn how the other half lives, and what its like if you don't have good health

or money. It was a wonderful job and I just loved it. Then I tore my shoulder to pieces and had to have surgery, so that ended that job."

"How did you hurt your shoulder?" I asked.

She pointed to her horse and laughed.

I laughed and said, "Oh no, Not her." and we both continued to laugh.

"Yep, back when she was a baby, about three years old, something spooked her. She flew up in the air and I flew the other way. I wrecked my shoulder." She laughed and laughed.

My husband retired about that time from Monsanto. It was an early retirement, that he was forced to take. Then I lost my job because I couldn't drive the van anymore. The neatest thing was that he looked for things that I could do and I looked for things that he could do. Sure enough, we found each other a job. I found this ad for people to work for the I.R.S. They needed someone with good math skills, good communication skills and a good vocabulary. He passed that test with flying colors. He found a job for me at what they call the adventure club at school."

"What's the Adventure Club?"

"They are the hours before and after school where you watch all of the kids. You do sports, crafts, you have to be their teachers and counselors. It was such fun."

That was all during a three year period of pure bliss. All of our kids got married and they had good weddings. Grandchildren were born. Sometimes you have a period in time when everything is absolutely wonderful, and this was one of those times." She smiled a big smile.

"I got into horses when my youngest, Valerie, was twelve. I bought us each a horse and we would ride about four or five times a week together, until she graduated from high school and went away to college. Then, I had a very wonderful friend give this Arabian to me." She pointed to Silk, who was still grazing nearby.

"Wow, they gave her to you. That was nice."

"Oh yes, and from then on I have been concentrating on her, just riding Silk."

"Were you here at this farm before you got Silk?" I asked.

"Oh yes, I was here for about five years before I got Silk. This is where my daughter and I would ride. We used to ride with a wild bunch. Then Valerie got married after college and I sold the other two horses and got the buyer to promise to keep the two horses together. She had a 7 acre farm with other mares and they had a

wonderful life. Dancer is still out there but Peaches died. She was twenty-eight years old. Since I have been riding Silk, I have been taking a lot of lessons and training Silk. I tell you what, when my husband became sick and was in the hospital, I knew he wasn't going to recover. The one thing I could do to keep everything going for me was to come down here and ride her. I will tell you something kind of interesting, on Valentine's Day I didn't know he had only two weeks to live. I brought him a basket of flowers because he couldn't eat anything, so it would have been kind of pointless to bring him some food. He said to me 'I couldn't get to the store so I wanted to give you this.' and he gave me his wedding ring. I put it on and still wear it to this day."

"Two days before he died he was kind of up and he said 'Karen, It's a beautiful day, so go play horse.' He loved her too. I remember coming out here to ride and saying to Olsa, Hey, Jim had a great day! Here I am. I am going to ride. Then he went into a coma Monday and died on Thursday."

"I have the greatest kids, they all stayed around and we did everything together. We talk about the memories now. We don't hide them. We still talk about Mark and he died about twenty-three years ago. We have what I call a strong family unit. All of my kids are very responsible and they all have families and they believe in earning what they get. They are not looking for something free, though they do play the lottery." We laughed together again.

"Oh, I love sports by the way. I taught swimming for about ten years."

I replied, "Oh, I love swimming."

Karen replied, "We used to swim down at my neighborhood pool. Then we formed a swimming team. All of my kids swam on the swimming team." She hesitated for a second.

I asked her, "How did you get all of them interested in the same thing?"

"Well, I wanted to swim, so we all swam." We laughed again. "Valerie, at the age of five was doing the butterfly swim."

"Wow, that's great." I said.

"Yep, yep. They were great swimmers. Another thing, my volunteer work is with an agency called ALIVE. They wanted me to be a crisis line operator but after I took the training, I realized that it was something that I couldn't do. I would want to go out and rescue someone but that's the dumbest thing that you can do. They have to rescue themselves. I just decided to help out in other ways."

"I have spent time working with the wildlife rescue. I spent a whole summer raising babies", she chuckled.

I said, "Oh, they are the cutest things." I told her about the fox that we have that hangs out at the other stable I teach at.

"Oh, that's neat. They are so pretty," Karen replied.

I asked, "Do you still work for them?"

"No, you have to work for them every year. I was going into my second year when my husband died. That was something that I didn't want to pin myself to do ever day at a certain time. I wanted to choose what I wanted to do at that time. Maybe I will get back to it next year."

"I am surviving fine. My husband had a lot of investments."

I told her about what I learned in class about Social Security. "Would Social Security be enough to survive on?"

"Oh, no. It wouldn't have been enough. I'm living well now because of Jim's investments. A week before he died, he told me where everything was. He also made out a will. I could never get him to make out one before."

"After he died, I played with the investments as if I was playing Monopoly. Finally, a family friend helped me out and showed me what to do with them. It was scary at first and I wanted to get rid of them. Now, I realize their importance."

"Another kind of a sad thing, Jim never had to go to the doctor for anything. He had been healthy all of his life. We were talking about a real sudden type of sickness. We wanted to know what in the world was wrong. It was cancer."

"Jim's mom is still alive. She's a hundred and one."

I said, "Oh, really!"

"Yes, she lives with his brother in Arkansas. His dad died about eight years ago. My mother is still alive at ninety and still runs her own household. She does all of her own stuff. The only thing that scares me to death is that she still drives." We laughed together.

I said, "Hey, that's okay as long as she's still coherent. My grandmother is in her nineties and she is a tough women. She finally had to go to a nursing home but she's still a fireball."

"You can expect some bad health to finally catch up with you, but I hope that I never have to go to a nursing home."

I asked, "Do you think exercise has helped you to keep in such good shape?"

"Oh yes. Look at my mother and mother-in-law. They both had very difficult years as mothers. Jim's mom was a farmer's wife. Talk about hard work, real hard work. My mother too, because we

lived in rural Pennsylvania. The exposure to tainted water and herbicides have an effect. Our farm food is processed. I kind of think that that has something to do with the reason our generation is living so long. I don't think the health of my children's generation will be as good. Hard work has paid off for me."

I said, "I think our generation watches a lot of television and eats a lot of fast food."

"There you go. Junk for the stomach."

"I used to belong to the health spas, but they closed."

I said, "I need to do more exercise so I can ride horses when I get older. The only exercise that I do is ride horses and walk."

Karen said, "Yeah, I guess that's not really pushing yourself. Aerobics are really good. We didn't have a car until after World War II so we would walk everywhere. We loved it."

I asked, "Did World War II affect you in any way?"

"Yes. My brother went in the service. He was in Italy. Long Island got a lot of black outs because of submarines along the coastline. There was a German spy nest located on the northern island. Other than that..."

We laughed again. I was having a good time interviewing Karen. Karen said, "We all fell for the propaganda. This is a glorious war. We didn't hear about the bad. It was a very glorious time. Any one who wanted a job, got a job. Oh, By the way, that's when my mother was forty something and decided that she wanted to be a nurse. She went back to school and got her practical nursing degree."

I said, "I'm impressed with your families motivation in school."

My youngest daughter is very smart. All three of my kids have high IQ's but Valerie was always a little different. Her mind was always up there somewhere. She's an aeronautical engineer now. She got her students pilot's license before she could drive a car."

I said, "That's really impressive. I have a good friend that is an aeronautical engineer and in fact, she's been selected to fly the fighter planes."

"I'll be darn. That's great. You know, I think we became so motivated because we used to read a lot. We loved to read. Most women just went to secretarial school but my mom always told us that we could be anything that we wanted to be. My sister was a geologist. A lot of her work was overseas. It started getting rough over there so she and her husband moved back over here and then ended up splitting up. She stopped working because she got very ill from something she picked up over there."