

Townshend man says no luck needed to reach 102

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Posted:

Reformer.com

Wednesday June 12, 2013

TOWNSHEND -- To celebrate his 102nd birthday this week, Warren Patrick expects to take a ride in a hot-air balloon.

But don't bother wishing him luck, because Patrick believes a higher power has guided him through a life that began 10 months before the Titanic sank.

That divine helping hand, Patrick says, led him through a hardscrabble New England childhood; an adulthood that included a 60-year marriage, four children and several changes of profession; and a long, healthy retirement that recently included recognition as an "exceptional retiree."

"I believe that I must have a guardian angel, because everything meshes -- it's not coincidental," Patrick said. "As far as luck is concerned, forget it -- I don't have any luck. I don't need it."

Patrick spoke at his apartment at West River Valley Assisted Living in Townshend, where he proudly displays the exceptional retiree award he earned last month at a dinner at Equinox Village in Manchester, Vt.

The award recognizes his "excellence in health and wellness." For Patrick, who has passed the century mark without aid of a walker or cane, those words define a way of life.

"I feel excellent. I keep active," he told a reporter recently, gesturing toward the sunshine streaming through his window. "A day like this, if you weren't coming, I'd be outside. I always have been."

Things didn't always look so sunny for Patrick, who was born June 13, 1911, in Springfield, Mass., as the youngest of eight children. He recalls a time when, after his father's business failed, the family was forced to move into a former two-car garage.

Though his older siblings had married and moved away, that still left Patrick, two sisters and his parents to share a small space.

"A blanket was hung down the middle of the garage, and my parents slept on one side and my sisters on the other," Patrick wrote in a recent account of his life. "Since there was no room for me, I had to sleep on the open porch at ground level -- no screen, no wall. I slept on a swinging couch summer and winter."

Patrick graduated from high school in 1929, the start of the Great Depression. He found work in a hardware store but also pursued night-school studies, looking to better himself.

It was there that he met his future wife, Phyllis.

In 1935, Patrick moved with his parents to East Hartford, Conn., where he took a job with Firestone Tire and Rubber Co. He persuaded his then-girlfriend "to pack a few things and join me."

"This she did, and a few days later we eloped and were married," Patrick wrote.

His work at Firestone preceded a World War II-era job with Pratt & Whitney in East Hartford. But Patrick says he "didn't want to work in a factory all my life, so I moved my family up here and bought a farm outside of Jamaica."

That happened in 1945, and there was little that was easy about rural life in Vermont at that time.

"There was no central heat, no running water, no flush toilet," Patrick recalled, adding, with a sly smile: "So we didn't go to the toilet until we got a better place."

Those "better places" also were in Jamaica, where Patrick eventually became town clerk and treasurer.

"While I was holding the town offices, I had time to drive the school bus, build several cottages and run a real-estate and insurance business," Patrick wrote.

He and his family settled in East Jamaica. Their life was not without tragedy: Patrick's father died in his arms in 1957 during a visit to Jamaica, just 15 years after Patrick's young son had collapsed while playing -- and also died in his arms.

Where others might ask, "why me?," Patrick sees symmetry.

"Both our son and my father passed away in my arms," he said. "I would not want this to happen any other way."

That typifies his approach to life, even in advancing years. Patrick lived alone after his wife's death in 1994, though he eventually was forced to surrender his driver's license and to acknowledge that he needed some assistance with day-to-day tasks.

That led him in 2007 to West River Valley Assisted Living -- also known as Valley Cares -- where Patrick feels fortunate to have found a niche.

"To me, this is A-1. They do everything for you. If you don't like the meals, you can have something different," he said. "I'm so happy that we found this place.... I can't think of anything that's lacking here that I would want."

Patrick takes full advantage of the woods nearby, sometimes walking a path to Grace Cottage Hospital.

"I can't beat it. I have the hummingbirds here," he said, pointing out a feeder hanging outside his window. "In the winter, I have a fox out in the yard, which I feed. I had a turkey walk through the yard the other day -- just like home."

Patrick's interests include baking -- he likes to make banana bread -- and photography. He has been carefully documenting the ongoing assisted-living expansion at Valley Cares, and he recently wrapped up a collection of photos showing interesting license plates.

"I kind of gave up on the license plates," Patrick said. "I've got over 350, and that's about enough."

Patrick also is fond of telling jokes. Some examples:

-- On his large family as a child (there were four girls and four boys): "I was about 4 years old before I understood why my sisters all had four brothers and I only had three."

-- On whether he ever hunted for bear: "I used to hunt bare. And it got so cold, I put clothes on."

-- On aging: "I feel as though I'd hate to get old. I've seen some old people. They were in their 90s."

-- To a nurse who visited his room during a recent interview: "You don't have any Budweisers?"

Humor aside, Patrick's not a drinker -- though he may enjoy a half a beer on a hot day from time to time.

Moderation is among his keys to a long life. Patrick asks the assisted-living kitchen for smaller meal portions to avoid putting on weight.

And, of course, he remains active -- almost legendarily so. His daughter, Sally Wadsworth, nominated him for the exceptional-retiree award and noted that her father "is able to walk a half-mile, some of which is uphill, without difficulty."

Patrick has been participating in Alzheimer's benefit walks and, last winter, he went snowshoeing. His daughter also noted Patrick's involvement in many Valley Cares activities.

"He has been an active member of the resident council and is not afraid to express his opinion or share a good joke," she wrote.

"He participates in the weekly Christian fellowship group and is an enthusiastic attendee on field trips," Wadsworth added. "He was recently honored, along with others, at a volunteer appreciation tea given by the activities director. He is very physically adept for his age and often helps set up and clean up for such events by carrying chairs or other supplies. He helps with gardening projects, shoveling dirt and watering plants."

Patrick says his faith -- "I have a code that I live by," he said -- keeps him going and helps him choose the correct path.

This week, that path will lead him for the first time to a hot-air balloon. Asked whether he was nervous, Patrick cracked another joke about his strong dislike for air travel.

"You've heard the term 'terra firma,' haven't you?" Patrick asked. "Well, with me, the more 'firma' the less 'terra.'"

But he also added this: "What do I have to worry about?"

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