

Sing elders' praises while they live

By Dean Nelson

August 31, 1996

This time last summer, during the heat wave in Chicago that killed hundreds of mostly old people I was in my aunt and uncle's high-rise condo in that boiling city with my 89-year-old grandmother.

She was concerned, because the nursing home where she lives was asked by the local utility to operate on minimal electricity. That meant no elevator, no television, and fans instead of air conditioners.

We were talking about the heat, her life, her family, when the condo's electricity went out.

We opened some windows and I checked the thermometer on the outside deck -- 104 degrees. The building was getting hotter by the minute.

"I should go back to my place," she said.

"How do you feel about walking down six flights of steps? It's the only way," I said.

As a little boy I remember calling her "Lumpy," for, well, obvious reasons. Now much thinner than she used to be, and still very alert, and maybe healthier than she had been in years, she wasn't even breathing hard by the time we got to the parking lot at the bottom.

"I wouldn't want to do that every day," was all she said.

I decided then that it was time to plan her 90th birthday party. Fast.

That meant contacting her 84-year-old brother in Santee. She has daughters in Minneapolis and Chicago, and a son in Kansas City. Grandchildren and great-grandchildren are in Kansas City, Boston, Chicago and San Diego.

I sent a letter to each of them, suggesting that it made a lot more sense to have all of us celebrate her life while she could be with us rather than at a funeral. I wasn't quite that crass, but that was the main idea.

Everybody agreed.

A cousin reserved a block of rooms at a motel near the nursing home. A restaurant owner donated the use of a back room so we could have a private party. We hired a photographer. I told family members with musical ability to prepare something to sing or play. A niece brought a portable pump organ that she plays at funerals and weddings.

But the point of the event, held this past spring, was to gather around Naomi Pearl Cunningham, look her in the eye, and say, "This is what your life has meant."

A life's lessons

We sang hymns that she and my late grandfather used to sing at jails on Sunday afternoons. Not everyone in the group is as religious as she. But we all quoted the verse perfectly from Proverbs that she always wrote at the end of her letters to us: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your path." Then we just sat in the room and talked about her. In front of her. To her.

There were stories about how her husband left her for alcohol, gambling and other women. When he came back a few years later, my grandmother's family welcomed him back like the biblical prodigal. Everyone put on suits and dresses and waited for him at the Chicago train station. He was forgiven. For the rest of their married life, their home was a haven for the troubled, distressed, estranged and lost. And for my mom and dad and my two brothers and me.

Her children talked of her consistency. A 60ish son-in-law blurted out, "Where would we be -- who would we be -- without this woman's prayers?"

That -- really -- opened the floodgates of stories. Grandchildren, one by one, made their way to where she sat, and told of the impact she has had on their lives.

One even asked if she missed our grandfather, who died about 30 years ago.

"Of course," she said with a shrug. "But I'm in no hurry to see him. He's the one who left me."

Then she told all of us what she believes her life means.

"Sometimes I lie in bed and wonder why I'm still here," she told the group that night. "I feel useless and helpless -- just taking up space. Then I remember someone who asked me to pray for them. I still have a lot of people depending on me. Who else will pray for you if I don't?"

Thomas Merton once said that, if you think the world is in bad shape now, imagine what it would be like if the people who have committed their lives to prayer stopped praying. Then we'd have a real mess on our hands, he said.

Counting blessings

I know that my grandmother won't live another 90 years. Maybe not even 90 days, or 90 minutes. This month she suffered a stroke and is showing signs of weakening. Selfishly I wish I could count on her intercessions until my kids get their driver's licenses, or have their first dates, or I have my next performance review at work.

A short story in *The New Yorker* magazine a year ago described a middle-aged man who visited his father every day at a nursing home. The father was continuously fading in and out of consciousness, and his decline was painfully slow for the family members responsible for him. He was a burden.

Thinking the father was in another coma, the son stood in the doorway of the room and said, "Why don't you just die?"

The father turned his head toward the son and whispered, "I'm doing the best I can."

There seems to be some ambivalence about old people. Plenty of guilt, maybe some resentment, but a lot of confusion about what to do with them. In 1980 there were about 2 million people 85 and older in this country. In 1990 the figure had grown by about another million, and more than half lived in nursing homes.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that, by 2000, there will be 4.3 million people more than 85 years old, and by

2050 nearly 18 million.

We can't just forget that they're here. They must have a purpose.

I don't want to stand in the doorway of a nursing home asking, "Why don't you just die?"

I want to look my elders in the eye, while they can still see and hear me, and tell them, "This is what your life has meant."

Caption: DEAN NELSON writes occasionally for the Union-Tribune.