

As More Live Past a Century, 100 Isn't What It Used to Be

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You can't call just anybody old. Not in this age-boom world. People are touchy. White hair, wobbly gait, creased face - so what! It happens to everybody. Someone who is 70 these days no longer feels old, might be running marathons, lifting barbells, serving as the secretary of defense. Somebody who is 80 thinks of merely "getting up there."

But face facts. Chaim Leon Stobnick is old. He's 100. In a few weeks, make that 101.

"Come on in," he said recently with a lack of fuss. "Be comfortable." His voice vibrated with enthusiasm. He pointed to a chair. Metal. Folding.

He had just gotten in himself. He lives alone in a one-bedroom apartment on West 106th Street. He was across the street having lunch, chatting with some of the regulars, at an adult day care program. He is a tiny man. He was bundled up in a snug sweater and plaid flannel pants. It was brittle out. He doesn't roam far -- to the corner of his street is about it. Straying farther leaves him short of breath. Look, he's old.

"I'm an optimist," he said. "Maybe it's stupidity these days to be an optimist. But I am. I am a believer. Believing is the most important thing to be."

He stood up. "Tell the truth," he said. "I don't look it, do I? People tell me all the time. They think I'm 80."

In this aging world, it remains elusive to live to become 100, but much less elusive. Although small in number, centenarians are proportionately the city's fastest-growing age bracket. The country's too. According to the 1990 census, 1,455 people who were at least 100 lived in New York City. The 2000 census identifies 1,787, an increase of nearly 23 percent, with 58 of them 110 or older. Nationwide, 50,000 people are estimated to have made it to 100, and demographers project that there might be close to one million in triple digits by 2050. Centenarians here, there, everywhere.

As it happens, the oldest New Yorkers remain among the least visible. Many live in nursing homes and suffer from dementia and other debilitating conditions, leaving them heavily reliant on others for life's commonplace tasks. A fair number of them, though, are clearheaded and robust, and continue to live in their own homes, with a spirited outlook on life. There's no one way to be 100.

About 80 percent of the oldest New Yorkers are women, better able than men to accomplish a century of living. For instance, Estelle Warner, who was at her kitchen table, and finished with her morning prayer. At 102, she is still living in her own one-bedroom apartment on East 68th Street.

When she was a teenager, she was a dancer in nightclubs. Gangsters, she said, were always hounding her to go out, but that wasn't for her. She didn't care much for the life and became a seamstress, and she was still working at 90. Returning from her job one day, she fell and broke a hip. That persuaded her to retire.

She was married at 16, but it didn't last long, and she never remarried. "Once burned was enough," she said briskly. She had a son, who died in 1994. When you live a century, you frequently outlive your children. She has no grandchildren.

A home care worker is always with her. They play copious games of rummy and checkers. She considers television "useless," except for "Jeopardy!" and "Wheel of Fortune." On weekends, she visits her favorite restaurant, McDonald's, where she has the Big N' Tasty sandwich and coffee. "Their coffee is very good," she said.

She stays away from the news. Bad news riles her too much, and there is so much bad news in the world. "I spend most of my time in bed," she said. "Frankly speaking, it's not easy. To outlive everybody is not fun."

Her last close girlfriend died last year, in her late 80's. "It makes you wonder," she said, "how much longer?"

In the course of living a century, you invariably have notions of why you did. "I never drank," said Julia Morrell, 101. "I never smoked. I never stayed out late. None of those bad habits. I always weighed 120 pounds. Now I weigh 122. I should

be losing weight, but I must be gaining weight."

Elvis Presley posters decorate her room at the Jewish Home and Hospital's nursing home on West 106th Street. She has an Elvis calendar, an Elvis snapshot. "I liked the way he shook and sang," she said.

She sat crocheting a robe. She donates what she makes to the home. She has made baby sweaters, a dog blanket. She plays bingo every Tuesday.

She married when she was 19, but her husband has been dead for more than 40 years. He was a box spring maker, and she worked for 10 years at a silk mill.

"The world, it's all different," she said. "More violence. It was much quieter when I was younger."

When you reach 100, who says you stop having ideas?

Anna Specht's apartment is compact, and exceptionally neat. She is also 101. She lives in the Kittay House, a building for the elderly in the Bronx. Not long ago, she suggested that residents bring in their wedding pictures and then see who could recognize them. Everyone had a lot of fun with that. Not long ago, she learned about a school tax credit available to her and many other elderly people and passed the word to others in her building.

She was born in London and came to America when she was 2, first to Massachusetts and then New York. Her father was a shoemaker. When she grew up, she supervised a shoe factory in Brooklyn. She married. Her husband was a butcher. They settled in the Bronx. They had two children. She left her job. "I never wanted to get married," she said. "I wanted to be a career woman. But then I got married."

Her husband died about 40 years ago. She returned to work, taking a job selling novelties at Macy's. After a while, she quit, and did volunteer work in the schools for years.

She is a fan of Bob Barker and "The Price Is Right." "At least if you watch Bob Barker, your mind has to work," she said. "You have to figure out whether they're right and if the price is right."

What did she think of what's going on in the world?

"Not too hot."

Why has she lived so long?

"If you work hard, they say it's good for you," she said. "I worked hard. I got up at 6 o'clock and I was there at 8. Life is how you make it. You have to take it as it comes. I'm not going to mourn about anything. I'm not going to complain if I'm sick. I always took life as it came. I say, 'I fight the devil.' I don't know how long I'm going to fight him, but I fight him."

The Hebrew Home for the Aged in the Bronx has dozens of centenarians, including Lenke Weingarten, 104. She attributes her own longevity to indifference. "It's the nonchalance," she said. "I don't care."

She is from Hungary. "My ambition was to be a painter," she said. "But it didn't work out. I got married." She did manage some paintings. On the wall hang a selection of them.

Her husband, who was in real estate and insurance, died a long time ago. She kept herself very active, volunteering in a hospital until she was 95. "Then I couldn't walk, so I stopped," she said.

She doesn't spend much time with other residents. "They're 60 or 70," she said. "They're so old. I'm not old. I'm ancient."

On another floor is Fay Fisher, 101, who mentioned that she was a big fan of Will Durant, the popularizer of philosophy. When something goes wrong, she said, her own philosophy is to ignore it.

"When you get really old," she pointed out, "you have to learn one very important word, and that's 'cope.' At my age, you have to expect a lot of things to go wrong. So you have to cope. A lot of people don't learn this. They fall apart."

She was born in New York, used to handle correspondence at Paramount Studios, married a lawyer, spent her retirement years in Florida, and dealt with her husband's death in 1970.

By now she feels she has probably put in enough years. "Let me tell you, it's not that great to live too long," she said. "I'd rather be dead already. I've lived my life. After you reach a certain age, the heck with it. I've had it. How much longer can you live than a hundred? But, let me say this, when my time comes, it will be no regrets."

Chaim Stobnick had photographs he wanted to show. His father. His seven siblings. All gone.

He was born in Russia, but moved to Poland with his family. He became an accountant. In 1939, weeks before the Second World War erupted, he traveled to Brazil for a vacation. When the war broke out, he was unable to return. "I was going to stay for 30 days," he said. "I stayed for nearly 30 years."

The vacation saved his life. The rest of his family -- his parents, his six brothers and a sister, as well as his siblings'

spouses and children -- all perished, most of them, he believes, in the concentration camps. "I never forget my family," he said. "I look at the pictures every day. My heart is bleeding every day." He took out a poem he had written about one of his brothers' being killed by the Germans. It was called, "The Death of a Hare."

In Brazil, he did very well as a fabric supplier and then a builder. He moved to the United States in 1967 and put his money into the stock market, whereupon it vanished. "I didn't despair," he said. "I am an enemy of despairing." He supported himself by visiting homebound elderly people. He did that for 18 years.

His apartment is spare of furniture but crammed with canvases. For years, he painted as a hobby. He has not painted recently, but thinks about starting again. He favors still lifes, because he doesn't get out much to see anything else to paint.

He wanted to mention his genes. Good ones, he said. He gave his evidence: a great-great-great-grandfather who lived in a small town in Russia. At the age of 100, he got into a dispute with a neighbor and needed a lawyer. The nearest lawyer was 50 miles away. He walked the 50 miles.

Never having married, Mr. Stobnick suggested impishly, might have also contributed to his long life. He got interested once. He noticed a woman at a company he did business with. He asked a man there to please introduce him. "Sure," the man said, "Mr. Stobnick, this is my wife." So much for that.

His life is a tidy set of repeating rituals. Every morning, he walks across the street to the adult center, reads the papers, stays through lunch, and then returns to his apartment by about 2. He rests for an hour. Then he reads, listens to classical music on his radio, has some dinner from Meals on Wheels or fixes some eggs or maybe cheese and bread. "I always have something around to eat," he said. "Not a problem." Then he turns in. The next day, it's the same thing. "It continues the same way, day after day," he said. "The same day."

He has all the time in the world, but feels there is none to waste. "I used to have a TV, but it took up too much of my time," he said. "I would watch it two or three hours a day. So I got rid of it five or six years ago. I prefer to live a quiet life."

He is exalted to have gone on so long. "Believe it or not, I like to be more than 100," he said. He carried on without much help until a few months ago, when a home attendant began coming by four days a week to do cleaning and shopping for him.

"I can go to the corner and back, then I have to rest," he said. "I have to remember I am 100. For the last three years, I have had to slow down."

People always wonder: how many more years? Mr. Stobnick shrugged. "I have no idea," he said. "I don't know how long I'll live. I just know I want to live. I have a lust for life."

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