Important Moments In Our Lives

Stories of Faith, Family, and Resilience

Written by:

Residents of Masonicare's Senior Living Communities in Connecticut, and compiled by Brian Sherwood of Generation Bridge.

Illustrations were created using ChatGPT, and in some cases, photos were provided by contributors.

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All stories were compiled from interviews conducted with and approved by the participating residents. The stories were written collaboratively using ChatGPT and the compiler, then reviewed and approved by the storytellers to ensure each story preserved their authentic voice.

- Dedication -

This book is dedicated to all the participants in the storyteller project, the staff who helped, and the children, friends, and family who might find some joy in reading these stories.

It was a pleasure meeting these incredible individuals who come from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and age groups. But no words or stories would have come together without inspiration from above.

John 1:1-5 (ESV)

The Word Became Flesh

[1] In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [2] He was in the beginning with God. [3] All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. [4] In him was life, and the life was the light of men. [5] The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Why this scripture? This project moved me deeply for many reasons, but what resonates most is that our lives ultimately become words—vivid descriptors that shape our stories and memories. These stories, and glimpses into the lives of others, help me return to Christ as the origin of all things, including the memories, stories, and words that define our shared experiences.

- A Note from the Compiler -

This project was inspired by my desire to preserve family stories after losing my grandmother in 2020. As dementia took hold, her memories faded, and I realized too late that I hadn't captured the stories she once told—about growing up in rural Wisconsin, working as a Rosie the Riveter in California, living through World War II, raising a family, and serving faithfully in her community.

After working with ChatGPT professionally, I wondered if it could help others like me record and retell these kinds of stories in the storyteller's own voice. Through this project, that idea became a reality. The technology was the easy part; the real challenge was in scheduling, listening, and honoring each person's memories. But it was worth every moment.

I hope this framework inspires others to record the voices of their parents, grandparents, and neighbors—so that the history they experienced continues to live on.

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Never Alone

By: Vincent Tanner

I was born in 1947—smack in the middle of five kids and often left feeling like I was stuck between everyone else's stories. I had two older sisters, two younger brothers, and me—wedged right there in the center. It seemed like they all had someone to pair up with. I was the one with hand-me-downs, a tiny room, and one new shirt for Easter. But I never felt alone.

Because even when no one was paying much attention to me, I always knew God was.

My house was one of faith and work—Christ at the center and hard work as the way of life. My father was a firefighter, and when he wasn't running into burning buildings, he was digging a basement by hand under our house—literally digging, with the house already built on top of it. That's the kind of man he was. By night he pulled stones the size of tombstones from the New England earth, by day he wore a uniform and risked his life. And somehow, he also managed to serve as District Superintendent of the Sunday School at West End Congregational Church.

We didn’t talk about faith—we lived it. It was the air we breathed. My mother had been raised Catholic before marrying my father. I was raised Protestant, and in school, we actually got one hour a week—during public school hours—to go to religious education. The Catholics went to St. Margaret’s, the Protestants to a nearby synagogue or church. Can you imagine that today? Faith, acknowledged in school as part of shaping a whole person.

It was during one of those classes that I had my first real run-in with misunderstanding. A young girl, Valerie Cunningham, showed up to the Protestant religious group, and I told her, “You can’t come—you’re Catholic.” That was all I meant by it. Race never entered my mind. But Valerie was Black, and the teachers immediately assumed it was about that. It wasn’t. Turns out she was Protestant too—and her father was a firefighter, just like mine. The misunderstanding was short-lived, but it stuck with me. Sometimes the world sees things that aren’t there, and sometimes it misses what is.

By the time I finished high school in ’65, I had a nomination to the U.S. Naval Academy. But I turned it down. There was a girl—a serious one. She didn’t want to wait the years it would take for me to finish Annapolis, and I didn’t want to lose her. So I declined the appointment, and just two days after graduating high school, I went on active duty in the Navy. We married in October of that same year and spent nearly 40 years together.

Looking back, I sometimes wonder if turning down the Academy saved my life. Many men who went through those programs flew over Vietnam and never came home. God had other plans for me. Instead, I became a radarman aboard the USS Dyess, known as the “Steamin’ Demon.” We went all over the world. I was on radar the day we became the last U.S. ship through the Suez Canal before it was bombed. I watched Israeli jets light up the scope. We were escorting the USS Forrestal after a fire had disabled its ability to launch aircraft. It was serious business. But the scariest moment of all came during what should have been routine maintenance.

I had gone up 75 feet to service the radar antenna, crawling through an 18-inch hatch to do it. When you're up there, you have to shut the system down and hang a sign: *"Do Not Radiate—Man Aloft."* The radiation from that dish can cook you like a microwave from 13 feet away. While I was up there, some officer decided the radar looked like it was angled wrong. He took down the sign, turned it on, and started rotating the antenna.

I dove headfirst through that 18-inch opening, grabbed the ladder on the way down, and slammed into the mast. Had I been even a second slower—or that hatch had been closed—I wouldn't be here. That wasn't luck. That was God's hand. Plain and simple.

After the Navy, I followed in my father's footsteps and became a firefighter in Bridgeport. It's paramilitary in structure, but it's something more—it's brotherhood. You live with those men. You eat together. You argue. You sweat. You trust. You don't always agree, but your life might depend on each other, so you make peace.

One day, we were at a scene—same building where a firefighter named Nick Auriemma had died just months earlier. He'd been electrocuted when a metal ladder got too close to live wires. It didn't even have to touch the line. Electricity arced. Killed him. Sent three more to the hospital.

That day, our chief wanted the ladder put through the same wires. I was only a lieutenant, and not even the officer of that truck company. But I told the guys, "Don't do it." The chief said, "They're dead wires." But the second he said it, they sparked—visibly. A bright blue arc. Like a camera flash. Everyone saw it. Nobody argued after that.

God was warning us. Giving us a sign. If I hadn't spoken up—or if the crew hadn't respected me enough to listen—we would've had another tragedy.

That's not the only time God rerouted me. Another morning, I was getting ready to go fishing. I couldn't find my thermos. I looked everywhere. By the time I finally found it and hit the road, the area I was supposed to be in had just been shut

down. A car accident. Telephone pole down. Live wires. I did the math in my head. Had I left on time, I would've been in the middle of it. Maybe dead. It's not coincidence. It's God's timing. Even when we're annoyed by delays, He's protecting us.

Later in life, I served as a deacon and elder for nearly 50 years at Easton Baptist Church. One day I noticed something off—the door wasn't shutting right – rubbing. I checked the building. The foundation was slipping. A well-meaning congregant had tried to dig out a basement and didn't realize you can't dig up to the granite footings. The walls were beginning to sink. Thanks to my construction background, things I learned from my dad—and maybe a little divine nudging—I was able to stop the church from literally collapsing into the earth. We brought in a mason, put in supports, and saved the structure.

It was the Lord's house. He had me there for a reason.

People talk about loneliness like it's something inevitable in life. But I've never been lonely. Not

once. I've been by myself plenty of times—but never alone. There's a difference. I've always known God was with me. That kind of knowledge saves you from a lot of mistakes. I never did drugs. Never chased things I didn't need. Because I was content. Not because life was easy, but because I knew who I belonged to.

Even when life hurt, I knew I wasn't abandoned. God answers every prayer, but sometimes the answer is *no.* Sometimes it's *not yet.* And sometimes it's *trust Me.*

When the Navy nearly killed me, when the fire could've claimed us, when I felt like a forgotten middle child with one new outfit to my name—He was there. And even when I couldn't see the purpose, I could sense the presence.

It's easy to miss the small signs—the delays, the nudges, the tingles down your spine when something just *feels* right. But when you live your life anchored in faith, you learn to see them not as interruptions, but as interventions.

I've lived a full life. A meaningful one. I've got two kids, four grandkids, and countless memories. But more than anything, I've had the comfort of knowing that I never had to walk any part of it alone.

That's a part of my story. Or at least the part I can share in this space. The rest? It's written in the quiet moments. In the split-second decisions. In the spark that warned us. In the thermos I couldn't find. In an open hatch beneath the radar. In the eyes of my grandchildren.

It's written in God's handwriting. And I'm just grateful to have been paying attention.

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My Story

By: Dottie Burdick Heise

Transcribed by Lynn Rouleau, May 2024

Middlewoods of Newington

I was born and raised in Willimantic, CT, home of the American Thread Company. Both of my parents worked. I was raised an only child as my little brother died at age two of leukemia. My first husband and I lived in the same neighborhood. I met my husband when I was 16 and he was 23. He had just returned from serving in the Navy in 1944. That was the time when Pearl Harbor was hit, and all the young people had gone to join the service. They used to play baseball in the empty lot in the neighborhood, and my husband played with his friends. We started dating and he borrowed his convertible and went to the state theater, where they played all the bands that used to come and play, like Vaughn Monroe, Sinatra, and the Mills Brothers, and then we used to go to the movies in town. I loved the movies - we'd stay there and see the movies twice. I dated my husband for 3 years and then we planned to get married. He was enrolled at the Teacher's College in Willimantic which is now called Eastern State College. We were married in 1949 and he was going to college

on the GI bill. The government paid the boys' tuition and gave us $25 a week to live on. I worked at the National Bank in the checking department and ran machines that helped keep track of the checks.

Our first child was born in 1950 and my husband was a junior. When he graduated, he got his first job in East Hampton, and we bought our first home there. It was a 4-room cottage at Lake Pocotopaug, we paid $6,000 for it. It's hard to believe we spent our summers on the water. The kids loved it. At three years old, the cottage became too small. For $13,500 we bought a house, a seven-room house, where our second son was born.

When our oldest daughter went to Eastern Connecticut State College, she was following in his footsteps to be a teacher and I had to work in Middletown as a nurse's aide. I left my home and worked on the 3rd shift at Middlesex hospital. By then we had several children that came every 2

years. I worked on the 3rd shift but after 6 years I went to Vinyl school. When I was 45 years old, I went to work there. Two of the boys were attending Vinyl Technical School at the same time - that's a state school where they learned a trade. The older girls went to college. The boys didn't want to go to college; they preferred to work with their hands. We had so much snow in those days that they bought snow machines, and they were the business that they were in. They had a business of snow plowing.

When my oldest daughter became a teacher, and my youngest daughter was a junior in high school, she went to Brazil to be an exchange student. I was 37 years old when she was born. I had 4 boys and 3 girls, and I wanted to have another child, because I wanted to see if we could have another girl, and we did. She was born on Mother's Day, in 1967. And she went on to be a nurse. She's the only one who followed in my footsteps.

When I was pregnant with my 4th child, she was born missing the top of her skull and only lived one week. Her name was Cynthia. Her condition was called “Anencephaly.”

When my son Danny was about seven or eight, while he was riding his bike, the chain broke, and he went over the handlebars and broke his jaw and had to eat strained food through a straw for several months.

My son David had some personal struggles and was gone from my life for many, many years. When we were finally reunited, it was wonderful. I ended up having all my children together when he came back into the family. It was the most difficult thing I ever went through, but I am so happy I got him back again.

When my oldest daughter was nine years old, she contracted rheumatic fever from strep throat and was on bedrest for three months. Due to the quick thinking of our doctor, Dr. Gardner, she was on a

regimen of aspirin and penicillin during this time and because of his quick thinking she has no residual heart trouble. He saved her life and she recovered nicely. Her symptoms were only severe pain in both legs.

I was 45 years old when I went to Vinyl and studied to be an LPN. She got a master's degree in nursing, and she was employed by Middlesex hospital. She was in management for many years. Together, five of the kids got college degrees. The girls wanted this, but my sons preferred working with their hands, and so they were employed as landscapers. One went to work at CVH with troubled youngsters, another worked at the atomic plant in Waterford, and the other did carpentry. My husband was a schoolteacher in East Hampton, but he became a diabetic, and he didn't take care of himself very well. Because he had diabetes, he developed heart trouble, and I was working at Middlesex Hospital and an LPN at Middlesex on the medical floor. My oldest daughter was a 4th grade teacher, and another daughter went to work

at Aetna on computers, and her husband also. And then the other daughter had a job in real estate, and her husband was an accountant. That's the story of that part of my life. We raised the kids, and I went to LPN school. But then my husband died. I was a widow for 5 years. And I decided, because of friends of mine, all the friends who I was working with were all going to write a letter. In those days you wrote a letter to the paper, advertising for somebody to dance with or do something with. So, I was a widow for 5 years, but I wrote a letter like my friends did, and I had only one answer from that. I still have the letter I wrote. Here it is:

Professional employed white widowed female, 5'2", 120 lbs., late 50s, nonsmoker, desires male companion, 55-65, who is health conscious, to enjoy movies, travel, Vermont, Florida, music, dancing, and dining out occasionally. Must have a sense of humor, be financially secure, employed, like people and families. Note, photo and phone number please. Reply to Box 1044, Middletown, CT 06457.

So that's what I wrote. There was only one man who answered my note. He was a successful businessman; he owned his own business. His name was Brooks Heise, a German name. He was 68, a little older than I had asked for. He was a very nice man. And we went together for a couple years, and then we were married in 1993. We eloped; we didn't tell anybody till afterwards. We eloped to Venice, Florida, and we both retired early, and had many years together.

We both retired and he had Parkinson's disease but was managing it pretty well. We were able to travel all over Europe. I have a list here of all the places we traveled:

1988	Israel
1993	Italy
1995	England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland
1996	Mexico
1997	Germany, Austria, Switzerland

2000	Turkey
2003	Spain, Portugal, Morocco

That's all the places we saw. So, we did that, and we had a wonderful time. I've had a very beautiful life. Two great husbands, eight children and 15 grandchildren, and now we are enjoying six great grandchildren. I went to live at McDonough Place in Middletown, but they closed, they ran out of money, and I had to find another place. So, I moved to Middlewoods in Newington. At age 67, I sold my big house and bought a beach house in Westbrook. And we paid $125,000 for that. My husband Brooks didn't want to put his money in the house, he wanted it to be just mine, so we had no problem there. When his Parkinson's finally took effect and made it impossible to go on, I took care of him in my big house, with the help of an aide, when he got to the point where he couldn't stand anymore, she had to get him up and wash him and everything, and finally when he was 90, he died. Then I lived 10 years in the first place (McDonough Place), and 2-½ years here.

Obituary for Dottie's husband:

Brooks Barton Heise, Sr. husband of Dorothy Burdick Heise, passed away peacefully January 8, 2013. He was born October 20, 1922, son of the late Frank and Gladys (Lincoln) Heise. He graduated from Hall High School in West Hartford, CT in the class of 1940, and was a graduate of Yale University with a degree in mechanical engineering in the class of 1946. Brooks served in the US Navy during World War II.

He was employed for many years by the PLAX Corporation in Stonington, CT. He founded Heise Industries, Inc., located in East Berlin, CT. in 1965 for the design and manufacture of molds for the production of plastic containers. He was a member of the Elks Lodge #1784 in Westbrook, CT. He was an avid sailor owning many different types of boats over the years. His woodworking skills were impressive,

making many of the furniture pieces in his home. Besides his wife, he is survived by a daughter, Susan of Hebron, CT and a son Brooks Jr. and daughter-in-law Lynn of Higganum, CT. Five grandchildren and eight stepchildren. A memorial service will be held Monday January 14, 2013, at 12:00 noon in the Spencer Funeral Home, 112 Main St. East Hampton. In lieu of flowers please send donations to: The Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research www.michaeljfox.org or Disabled American Veterans www.dav.org. To leave online condolences please visit www.spencerfuneralhomeinc.com.

My biggest thanks go to God for all the love He gave me.

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My Dad's Garden and a Life Well-Lived

Submitted by Connie Koskelowski

My dad grew up in a large family with his mother, father, four brothers, and two sisters. He served in World War I as part of the 317th Field Signal Battalion. After returning home, he went on to work as the chief estimator at the Farrel Birmingham Company in Ansonia.

In the early 1930s, he married my mother, and they rented a place on Westfield Avenue where my brother and I were born. In 1937, my father had a house built on a building lot he had purchased on Edgehill Road, on the west side of Ansonia. His brother Lewis had bought the lot next door, but when Aunt Martha—Uncle Lewis's wife—wanted to live closer to her family on the other side of town, Lewis sold his lot to my dad. From then on, that extra lot became my father's vegetable and flower garden.

Every spring, the garden was enriched with manure, which a local farmer would deliver and spread. A second farmer would then plow it into the soil, preparing it for planting. Most of the plants were started from seed, carefully cultivated.

Potatoes, of course, were planted from cut pieces with “eyes” to start the growing process.

Dad had a rain barrel buried in the ground beneath the downspout near the garage. He used that collected water with his watering can during dry spells, though he also had a couple of hoses connected to the spigot at the back of the house if needed.

Once gardening season arrived, Dad would rise early each morning to pull weeds and tend to the garden. As the vegetables ripened, he’d harvest what was ready and place it on the table in our enclosed back porch so my mother could use it for that day’s meals.

He’d come back in around 8 a.m., wash up, change into his suit and tie, and head off to work by 9. Every day, he drove his Packard to Farrel’s and back. At noon, he would come home for dinner, which always featured fresh vegetables from the garden. My mother had the meal ready right on time.

The back section of our cellar was closed off from the larger basement area. In the main part was the furnace, some indoor clotheslines for rainy or cold days, and a small woodworking area where Dad kept his father's old tools. The back room had a dirt floor, which kept it cool. Along two walls were shelves where my parents stored jars of canned vegetables, jellies, and jams—most of which they had preserved themselves. They used many Mason jars, and each year the lids had to be replaced. They also canned peaches from Hale's Orchard and made grape jelly from Concord grapes Uncle Leon would find along the way.

Every Sunday, Dad would drive my mom, my brother, and me to the Derby Methodist Church. Mom sang in the choir while my brother and I attended Sunday School. We then sat with our grandmother, aunt, and uncle during the church service. Afterward, Dad—who had returned home to prepare Sunday dinner—would come back to Derby to pick us up.

Dad was raised in the Immanuel Episcopal Church in Ansonia, he enjoyed telling us stories from his

youth. One of our favorites was about how he and his brother had to pump the bellows of the pipe organ from the church cellar when they were boys.

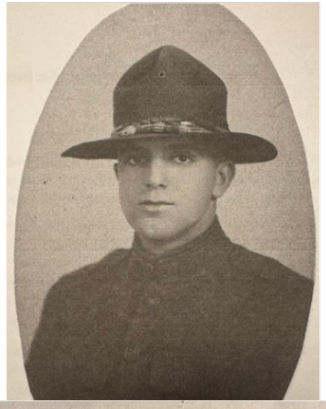
Each week at church, we sat behind Frances Osborne Kellogg, a fellow member. When my dad provided flowers for the altar, she would often compliment his arrangements. One Sunday, she asked if he might share a few of his flower varieties for her garden. True to form, he graciously delivered them to her homestead himself.

Our house on Edgehill Road sat just before the road turned to dirt. In the 1950s, construction began on Route 8. Three homes across the street were relocated farther down the road. The state offered my father $11,000 to move his garage over to the side of the house where the garden was. But Dad had a better idea.

He invited one of the machine operators working on the highway to carve a new driveway closer to the front of the house. The path curved through the lower part of the garden and reconnected with the

original upper driveway. In the end, he never moved the garage—but he did receive the $11,000 payment. In his mind, he considered it a wash: the cost to build the house back in 1937 had also been $11,000.

Connie wanted to share a photo and some information about her beloved father:



Aux Grands Chefs - Aux Officiers - Aux Soldats - A Tous

« Héros connus et anonymes, vivants et morts, qui ont triomphé de l'avalanche « des barbares et immortalisé son nom à travers le monde et pour les siècles futurs, « la Ville de Verdun, inviolée et debout sur ses ruines, dédie cette médaille en « témoignage de sa reconnaissance. »

Le nom de M GEORGE E. YOUNG,
Sergeant, Co. B, 317th Field Signal Battalion,
U. S. Army,
est inscrit sur le Livre d'Or des " SOLDATS DE VERDUN "
St. Mihiel, Meuse-Argonne 1918

Le Président des A. C. de Verdun
" On ne passe pas "

Le Président
du " Livre d'Or ",

Le Maire de Verdun,
Député de la Meuse,

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Tony, Tony, Tony…

By: Joan McGrath

You spend enough years on this earth, you start losing things. Sometimes it's just a sock in the laundry. Sometimes it's something more sentimental. But somewhere along the way—maybe from my mother, maybe from some nun in catechism class—I learned that if something goes missing, there's one particular saint you want on the case: Saint Anthony.

Now, I know it sounds a bit silly to some people, but there's a little prayer that goes with it. I've said it so many times over the years I could say it in my sleep: **"Tony, Tony, Tony, look around—something's lost and can't be found."**

My mother didn't like that I called him "Tony." Said it was too informal. I told her, "Well, formality or not, he gets results."

She'd lost a bra once, and I said, "Why don't we ask Saint Anthony?"
I said the prayer—just like that.
She was scandalized. "Calling a saint 'Tony'? Honestly."
I said, "Ma, you want the bra or not?"

She found it. Still annoyed, but at least she was properly dressed again.

Another time, I was working at the library—my second act after nursing. A woman who'd been spending most of her days there, who was, well… living out of her car, let's just say—couldn't find her keys. She was upset, pacing, nearly in tears. I said, gently, "Let's try Saint Anthony," and whispered my usual line.

"Tony, Tony, Tony, look around…"

She got furious. Thought I was making fun of her. I wasn't—I never would. That little prayer has helped me more than once. And wouldn't you know it? Within a few minutes, we found those keys tucked in between the cushions. She looked at me like I was either a witch or a miracle worker after that. Never quite sure which.

And most recently, well… I lost a pin. Nothing fancy, but I'd had it for over 50 years. And I just knew it had to be somewhere in my room. So I started in with my old refrain.

“Tony, Tony, look around…”

So far? Nothing. But I’m not giving up. Saint Anthony works on his own timeline. Sometimes I think the point isn’t just about finding what you’ve lost—it’s about remembering you’re not alone while you’re searching.

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The Road to Tennessee

By: Joan McGrath

I was raised in a small town called Mildred, Pennsylvania—the kind of place where your path was laid out for you early on. If you didn't want to spend your life in a factory or behind a counter, you had to find another way. For me, that way was nursing school. It wasn't a grand plan, really—just a friend going to an interview, and I tagged along. She never finished. I did.

That decision set my life in motion. It brought me to Washington, D.C., to work at Walter Reed, and later to Brooklyn, where I met Bill. He was a kind man—patient, easygoing, content in his routines. He had grown up in the city and never needed to learn how to drive. The subway was all he ever needed. Even during his military service, no one ever asked him to get behind the wheel.

When we eventually settled in New Jersey, I handled the driving. Whether it was trips to see my family in Pennsylvania or errands around town, I took the wheel. It was fine, for a while.

Then came the decision to visit my sister in Tennessee.

I remember looking at the map and thinking: “I’m not driving all that way alone.” So I told Bill it was time he learned.

We trained the way many families did—practical, simple, and with little fanfare. After dinner each evening, we’d take the kids along for a ride. I’d place Bill in the driver’s seat and sit beside him, offering quiet instruction as we looped around neighborhoods and made short trips to visit his sister. He didn’t complain. That wasn’t his nature. He absorbed everything with a calm resolve and, in time, he became a steady, confident driver.

When the day came to leave for Tennessee, we were ready. We loaded up our little Volkswagen and headed south. He drove most of the way, though I could sense his unease anytime a tractor-trailer barreled past. The heavy highway traffic was new to him, and it rattled his nerves. So we adjusted. I took the wheel during the more demanding stretches, and he drove when the road felt more forgiving. By the end of the trip, his confidence had grown.

Years later, long after he retired from his job in accounting, Bill decided he still had more to give. He earned his commercial driver's license and became a school bus driver. It wasn't a role I could ever imagine for myself, but he found purpose in it. He liked the children. One boy in particular had no father at home, and Bill took him under his wing—brought him donuts, showed him around a local factory with big machines that made the boy's eyes light up. I remember cautioning him, "You can't do that, Bill." But he simply said, "He might need it."

That moment, small as it was, probably stayed with that child longer than we'll ever know.

Looking back, I see how a simple necessity—learning to drive for a family trip—opened the door to a whole new chapter of service and connection. What began as a push became a path. And Bill, in his quiet way, made a difference.

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The Reason I Stayed

By: Joan Pullo

Joan Pullo was born into a world that was anything but gentle. The home she knew as a child was full of fear, uncertainty, and emotional pain. Her father, afflicted with undiagnosed mental illness, was physically abusive to her mother—a quiet, dutiful woman who kept an immaculate home and raised her children with what strength she had left. Joan remembers her mother often putting her down, telling her she was unwanted, and undermining her self-worth. Yet Joan saw the strength in that woman. Despite the harshness of her words, her mother endured what many could not, and Joan came to understand that pain had shaped her as much as her resilience.

School offered no real escape. Joan often found herself lost in thought, not because she didn't care, but because she was haunted by worry—wondering if she might return home to find her mother had been beaten or worse. Her performance suffered, but no one ever stopped to ask why. In those years, it wasn't common to talk about mental health or trauma. She internalized the idea that she

was stupid, even though life would later prove that wrong.

Joan’s salvation in those formative years was her siblings—especially her older sisters, Ruthie and Nancy. They were more than sisters; they were protectors, surrogate mothers, and confidantes. When Joan was frightened, it was Ruthie who explained what her mother would not, and Nancy who rocked her to sleep on a hammock, singing softly. They were her foundation in a home that often felt unstable.

At fourteen, Joan's world shifted again. Ruthie, married with a young daughter, was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s disease. Joan poured herself into caring for her sister—cleaning the house, helping with her niece, and being present in any way she could. Later, Ruthie took Joan into her home, offering her an escape from the toxicity of their household and a glimpse of what life could be. It was under Ruthie’s roof that Joan first truly felt safe and loved. Watching her sister face illness with grace and strength planted a seed in Joan—a

desire to serve, to care, to love deeply and without condition.

When Ruthie's cancer returned, Joan's prayers became desperate. She pleaded with God to take her instead. She saw no future for herself, felt unwanted at home, and believed her sister's life—full of promise, with a husband and child—mattered more. But Ruthie passed, and Joan remained. The pain was suffocating. She carried guilt for years, unable to understand why she had been left behind.

The answer didn't come immediately. Life moved forward in messy, beautiful, and often painful steps. Joan married a man she loved with all her heart, hoping for a family full of warmth and safety. But the cycle of abuse returned. Her marriage was marred by physical and emotional violence. Still, she endured, refusing to abandon her children or her role as their protector. She made a quiet vow to be the opposite of what she had endured—to love openly, to speak words of affirmation, and to never strike in anger. When the

time came, and her children were grown, she left. She started over, with little more than her faith and determination.

Joan found her calling not in grand acts, but in the steady rhythm of compassion. She worked as a CNA, providing care with a tenderness that many patients hadn't known in years. She instinctively understood how to meet needs—opening windows to let in fresh air, brushing hair with gentle hands, and bringing dignity to moments others might rush past. Her home became a refuge for those on the margins. Young people rejected by their families found warmth and safety under her roof. Pregnant teens, gay youth estranged from abusive parents—Joan welcomed them, guided them, and sent them back into the world stronger than when they arrived.

Even strangers seemed drawn to her spirit. In grocery store lines and passing moments, people would confide in her, often sharing more than they had told their closest friends. Joan would listen, and if invited, offer a gentle word of wisdom. Her

life became a quiet ministry, rooted not in sermons but in service.

The years brought challenges Joan couldn't have foreseen—natural disasters that took homes and cherished possessions, health struggles, and loneliness. Yet through it all, she kept going. She found comfort in her faith, in her children who remained close and loving, and in her deepening bond with her sister Nancy. In their later years, the two became inseparable. Joan would visit daily, care for her when she was ill, and always end their conversations with the words she longed to hear as a child: I love you.

It took Joan decades to see the purpose in her survival. The sorrow of losing Ruthie, the pain of her upbringing, and the disappointment of her marriage all became part of a tapestry that allowed her to touch others in ways no one else could. She came to understand that her life wasn't spared arbitrarily. She was left here to help, to heal, and to be a beacon for those who might otherwise fall through the cracks.

Joan's life isn't defined by the hardships she endured, but by the love she gave. She is a testament to the idea that some of the most important work we do on this earth is unseen, uncelebrated, but deeply impactful. She may never know just how many lives she has touched, but the ripple effects of her kindness continue on—in the children she raised, the strangers she comforted, the youth she sheltered, and the sister she still watches over with unwavering love.

In the end, Joan Pullo stayed. She stayed to love. She stayed to serve. She stayed to remind the world that even a broken beginning can become a beautiful legacy.

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A Life of Making It Better

By: Larry Mitchell

Larry was born in 1934, in the heartland of America—Des Moines, Iowa—at a time when the world was preparing for war and the Great Depression was still fresh in the minds of many. He grew up in a bustling household of five children and two parents who didn't preach about service; they modeled it. Whether it was picking up the slack during World War II or simply showing up where a hand was needed, Larry's family instilled in him an unwavering drive to serve. Not for accolades, not for profit—but because someone had to do it. And if something needed doing, why not be the one to do it?

Childhood During the War

Some of Larry's earlier memories are not of play, but of purpose. As a pre-teen, summers meant time not at the beach or on bikes with friends, but on his cousin's farm in the northwest corner of Iowa. The war had taken most of the able-bodied men, and there were fields full of wheat that still needed to be harvested. Larry and his older sister answered

the call. Together they loaded hay bales, gathered eggs, milked cows, and even rode alongside the farmer to deliver grain to the local elevator, watching the clouds of dust rise while unloading.

The rhythm of the farm wasn't easy, but it made sense. Wake early, finish chores, work in the fields, clean up, and prepare to do it all again. Larry wasn't even a teenager yet, but already he was learning that if something could be made better, more efficient, more helpful—then it should be.

Back home in Des Moines, the family stayed just as busy. His father, a World War I veteran, worked full-time managing an A&P warehouse but also took weekend shifts as a taxi driver. It wasn't about money—there just weren't enough drivers. His mother, a skilled cook and gracious host, filled their home every Sunday with clergy or members of the Women's Auxiliary Corps. With the help of his younger sister, Larry walked the neighborhood collecting aluminum, rubber and scrap metal for the war effort. His older brother and sister rushed

through high school to serve: she became a nurse in Saipan, and he trained to be a fighter pilot.

Even young Larry had responsibilities beyond his years. He tended to the nuns' vegetable garden during the week and biked to the local parish to serve as an altar boy on weekends. Faith wasn't something talked about much but his family didn't distinguish between the sacred and the practical; they offered both with equal dedication.

It was just a way of life, where you did what needed to get done.

A Thread of Service

Larry didn't serve in the military like his siblings—a bout with the Chicken Flu he caught while likely working on his cousin's farm as a child left a lasting mark on him, and during his military physical, the defect was discovered. He was classified 4F, medically unfit for service. He didn't dwell on what might have been. Instead, he kept working.

After finishing high school, Larry pursued a degree and was hired by IBM before graduating in 1956. This was the golden age of computing, when computers were roughly as big as the dining room at Wesley Heights and programming was primarily done with punch cards rather than electronic methods. Larry quickly recognized the potential, not just of the machines themselves, but of the systems and logic behind them.

To Larry, computers weren't mysterious or magical. They were simply machines—tools that would do exactly what you told them, if you told them properly. That was the key: proper instruction. Logic. Order. Systems. That's where Larry thrived.

He built a successful career selling computing systems to companies like dairies, bakeries, and beverage distributors across Chicago. He didn't just pitch products—he studied their workflows, learned their inventory patterns, and devised efficient ways to track orders and billing with punch cards. He even built a system that could

generate invoices and update inventory automatically, all using the same set of cards. All he had to do was specify the equipment to do it efficiently which kept prices competitive.

As his reputation grew, so did his reach. Larry expanded beyond one company to entire categories of business, overseeing installations across Chicago. He worked not only for IBM but later went to work for the pioneering Wang Laboratories, founded by Dr. An Wang, a Chinese-American innovator who built one of the great computer firms of the mid-century.

The Call to Serve—Again and Again

Outside of work, Larry's life was equally driven by a quiet call to serve. Though he never pursued the priesthood, others thought he should have. A Passionist priest and a Christian Brother—both of whom knew Larry well—once debated which religious order he'd join. "That's a true story," he chuckled, reflecting back. "I didn't go that way, but I guess I had the look of someone they could count on."

And people did count on him. Always.

As success moved him east to Connecticut, he and his wife bought a modest home in New Canaan, which appreciated over time, but more than that, they found community. He became a Eucharistic Minister and served regularly at his parish. His career remained steady, but later in life job security wasn't always guaranteed. Still, Larry gave what time he could to the church and community. Sometimes, it meant leading. Other times, just showing up.

Long after his formal retirement, Larry once again found himself serving—this time as Chairman of the Resident Council at Wesley Heights, a senior living community in Shelton, CT. What was supposed to be a two-year role turned into five and a half; there weren't an awful lot of volunteers chomping at the bit to serve as Chairman. Larry didn't seek it out. He simply answered the call.

Even today, well into his 90s, Larry still volunteers to help lead Thursday rosary or manage bingo logistics so the games move swiftly and without

confusion. He is humble about it, recognizing that is just how he has always been.

The Family Legacy of Care

Perhaps the most powerful thread in Larry's story isn't just his own service—but the family legacy of it. His siblings didn't just serve in uniform; they served through care. His sister helped nurse wounded soldiers in the Pacific. His brother trained in aviation. Another sister served in the USO, offering warmth and hospitality to passing troops.

His father, well into middle age, was back behind the wheel—driving clergy, military personnel, and strangers wherever they needed to go. His mother? She was a rock. During the war and beyond, she fed visitors, clergy, and strangers alike. Hobos from the train tracks knew which back door to knock on. There was no sign—just word of mouth. If you were hungry and looking for help, you could find it at the Mitchell's.

This wasn’t charity. This was neighborliness. Community. Quiet Christian love.

“My mother always had something ready,” Larry recalls. “Even if she didn’t, she made it work.”

The Logic of a Life Well Lived

In many ways, Larry’s life has mirrored the logic that first drew him to computing. Problems arise. Systems are built. Solutions are implemented. But what makes his story so enduring is that he applied that logic with heart. He didn’t just solve technical problems—he solved people problems. He made things better. That’s the phrase he returns to again and again. “Making it better.”

Making work smoother. Making bingo faster. Making the church run. Making someone feel welcome. Whether it was selling machines, organizing pages in binders for new residents, sitting at bingo, leading a prayer, or helping his mom pass a meal to a stranger—Larry lived by one operating principle: if it can be made better, let’s make it better.

Not with grand gestures. Not with ego. Just by showing up and doing the thing that needs doing.

And in doing so, Larry leaves behind something remarkable—not just a legacy of technological success, or even community leadership, but a consistent example of humble, practical love. Faith doesn't have to shout. Sometimes it moves through the world quietly, efficiently—like a well-programmed system—making life better for the people it touches.

A Final Thought

Now, at 91, Larry looks back not with regret, but with gratitude. His career in computing took him from the punch cards of the 1950s to the microchips of today. But the real success wasn't found in code or sales quotas—it was in a life that answered the call to serve again and again.

Whether he was building an invoice system in Chicago, feeding the poor in Iowa, helping a friend play bingo in Connecticut, or leading a residents'

council well beyond his term—Larry was always doing what he's done since childhood:

Seeing a need. Filling a need.

And through it all, quietly "making it better."

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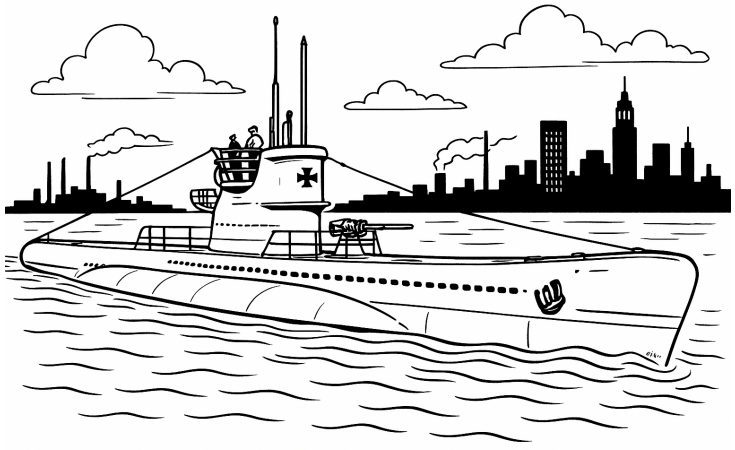
Don’t Go to War

As Told by Martha Lown – Age 100



I was born and raised in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and I've lived a long life—one hundred years. Sometimes that number surprises me, but I still feel like the same person I've always been. Age, to me, is just a number—and mine, I like to say, is "unlisted." I might move slower these days, but inside, I'm still me.

Growing Up in the East End

My childhood unfolded near Remington Woods in the East End of Bridgeport, where my parents bought a little property with a hundred-foot garden. We planted blackberry bushes, and my cousin and I would pick the berries and sell them for ten cents a basket. They were big, beautiful berries, though I always kept an eye out for snakes that liked to hide beneath.

Winters were spent skating on the frozen ponds nearby. The older boys built fires to keep us warm, and from time to time, we'd see horse-mounted police patrolling the woods where ammunition was stored in earthen mounds. To us, they were just men on horses—a thrill every time they passed.

Work and Wartime

When World War II began and many of the men went overseas, I went to work for the United States Navy as a civilian government inspector, and I was assigned to Manning, Maxwell, and Moore on Kossuth Street in Bridgeport. I inspected manifold gauges for Navy airplanes—small parts that played a big role in keeping planes flying safely. It was interesting work, and I learned more than I ever expected to.

That's also where I met my husband, James Lown. At first, I wasn't impressed. He worked nearby, and I made a game of reading the numbers to him faster than he could write them down. Over time, though, I saw he was a good man—respectful, steady, and kind. He'd learned those things from his mother.

James later joined the Navy and served in Europe. We wrote letters through the war, and when he returned, we dated for a year before getting

married. I lost him about ten years ago. He was a good man, husband and father.

Bridgeport on Alert

During the war, everyone did their part. There were neighborhood drills, air raid practices, and local guards in white helmets who showed us where to hide if the bombs came. We'd crouch under the kitchen table, after all we'd never fit under the coffee table. Factories were working day and night, and rumors German U-boats along the coast were ever present. There were sightings in Long Island Sound and all the way up to New London. We knew the city's factories were targets.

Still, there was joy even in those uncertain years. Great bands performed at the local theaters. I still remember a time when my cousin and I, being a little younger, skipped school from Harding High to see one of those bands perform. The teachers probably knew, and they let it go, but we didn't do it again. Dances at Seaside Park were also popular,

and I remember meeting my future husband, James, for a date at one of those dances.

Life wasn't easy in those days, but it was good. During the war, you couldn't always buy what you wanted—meat, butter, sugar—all rationed. My mother somehow always managed to bring home enough for a decent meal. We'd go to the butcher across from St. Michael's Church near Pulaski Street, and she always timed it right to get what we needed. There was usually spaghetti and meatballs on the table, and that felt like a small victory.

When the war ended, I continued to work—first at Macy's, then later at General Electric, inspecting more gauges. My mother-in-law had lost two sons in the war—just boys (after all they drafted them at eighteen then) —and she never quite recovered from it. James was her last surviving son, and she had begged for him to be spared from service. The government didn't listen, but thankfully, he came home. Even so, the loss hung in her heart.

Family and Lessons

James and I raised two children—a boy and a girl—and built a good life together. My daughter lives in Naugatuck now, my son down south. Between them, I have six grandchildren and a few great-grandchildren. They were good kids, though I'll admit they got away with more from their father than from me. "A little fear," I used to say, "never hurt anybody."

Things cost less then, but they also meant more. A nickel movie was a treat, and if you misbehaved, losing that privilege stung worse than any lecture. "Nothing costs a nickel anymore," I like to joke, "not even a Hershey's Kiss."

Reflections of a Century

Looking back, I've had a good life. Not perfect, but good. A loving husband, two children, a home filled with laughter and hard work. I've lived through good times and hard times, seen the world change again and again, but of all those years, the war left the deepest impression.

If I could give any advice to the generations after me, it would be simple: don't go to war.

War changes everything and everyone. It takes people you love, and those who return are never quite the same. It teaches sacrifice and strength, yes—but mostly, it teaches loss. But throughout everything, always remember the good times and who made this country safe.

- Reflections -

One of the main goals of this project was to explore whether this storytelling approach could be *systematized*—a process that others could replicate to preserve stories in their own families or communities. The answer is yes; it can. Future materials will share some of the lessons learned and best practices for running a similar project.

The process itself wasn't complicated, but it did take time—scheduling interviews, conducting meaningful conversations, and proofreading the stories captured through ChatGPT. The effort, however, was gratifying.

If you want to preserve the memories of loved ones, don't wait for the "perfect" time—start now. Record their stories, input them into ChatGPT or another AI writing tool, and watch their voices come to life on the page. It's never too late to begin, and every story saved is a gift to future generations.

This kind of project is also perfect for organizations like Masonicare, home care

agencies, and others dedicated to serving our seniors. These stories do more than build archives—they foster connection. They reignite the light in the eyes of those we love and serve, reminding us that behind every act of care is a lifetime of meaning.

- Acknowledgements -

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With Tim's help, we were able to re-engage volunteers and schedule interviews, thanks to the dedicated efforts of **Lynn D'Angelo** and **Donna Brice**. I also want to acknowledge **Patti Schif**, whose collaboration on one of the interviews added an excellent touch to the process.

Thank you all for helping capture these stories and preserve them for generations to come.