

Nonagenarians have much to teach us youngsters



BARB GUY

I always tell people I have the world's smallest family. It's nearly true; I'm completely without parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings or children. As a result, I spend much time with friends, usually those near my own age.

People in any age group share a cultural shorthand, a history. Even in our differences, we come from the same context, bringing familiarity and comfort, making things easy and pleasant, but limiting diversity.

That's why I feel fortunate to have recently spent some time with people in their 90s. They offer an education I can't get other ways. Two weeks ago, my husband, Chris, and I traveled to Indiana to celebrate two big events, the 60th wedding anniversary of his parents, Hubert and Alice, and Hubert's 90th birthday.

Hubert's four children, along with their spouses and all but one of the eight grandkids, came, traveling from Idaho, New Jersey and Utah, bringing three of the four great-grandkids along.

Hubert and Alice still live in the house where they raised their kids, on 100 acres of land. Hubert has health problems but nothing that hindered his ability to 1) mow more than three acres of grass in anticipation of our arrival, 2) climb onto the roof with his sons to a) repair a leak and b) remove an irrelevant but giant television antenna, and 3) construct a huge barbecue grill out of an old steel window frame and some wire mesh, all while certain grandchildren and daughters-in-law napped, played cards, read books, swam in the pond and whined about being deprived of cell phone and Internet service.

Hubert spent his career teaching high school journalism and English and directing school plays. He taught the Mellencamp boys and he'll tell you that John's brother Tony actually had the better voice while getting none of the fame, which no one should seek anyway.

Another nonagenarian dear to my heart is my friend Marv Arent. He's turning 92 today. Marv and I met seven years ago. I recognized his name instantly.

Arent's was one of my mom's favorite fine dress shops when I was young.

As a small kid I'd lie on the floor under the clothing racks, waiting for her. I look back now, not sure if it's a memory or my imagination, and I see Marv and his wife/partner Lynn bustling in the shop, graciously greeting customers.

Marv has been helping me with a history project lately. He's like Hubert, very matter-of-fact about any accomplishments or accolades, very oh-it-was-nothing about things that must have been quite difficult.

Marv was in the army during World War II and served almost five years, training infantrymen and commanding a tank destroyer in Italy, protecting U.S. Sherman tanks engaged in battle, and earning a Purple Heart (which he has never mentioned to me).

Hubert, on the other hand, was a conscientious objector who fought domestic forest fires -- by parachuting into them -- to be of service during the war. These men demonstrated ample courage in their separate ways, courage most of us today are never asked to summon.

Hubert and Marv came of age during the Great Depression and put themselves through college,

The Salt Lake Tribune

Marv by washing dishes in a frat house (“pearl diving”) and Hubert by selling ice cream. Marv, true to his clothier days, is always sharply dressed while Hubert is nearly always smudged with grease, tar or mud. Between them, they raised six fine children, all college graduates, all with advanced degrees.

Marv and Hubert are absolute gems. I feel so lucky to know them. These men, born in 1917 and 1919, have much to teach, but they’re not going to be showy about it. We young ones have to remember to ask and to listen.

BARB GUY is a regular contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.