

Published August 4th, 2010

## Nonagenarian Sets Great Example

By Cathy Tyson



Peggy Harbarth in the garden of her Burton Valley home. Photo C. Tyson

At 90-years-young, Margaret "Peggy" Harbarth lives independently and has gracefully aged in place - she's an inspiration for seniors everywhere. Blessed by good health and activities that bring her joy, she's like the Energizer bunny.

Her advice on the stock market and life, "don't look back." At times she describes herself as having more "courage than brains" and "having a good attitude toward life - that's what keeps me going."

The diminutive blond with sparkling blue eyes drives, has an active social life and her only help is a gardener who tends the yard. She still does her own housekeeping and all of the usual household chores. For the last ten years she's been a member of the Lafayette Rotary - and is proud of her perfect attendance record.

She and husband Robert watched their Burton Valley Marchant home being constructed in 1956. Everything is still original and in perfect condition, with the exception of the spacious family room with wrap-around windows they added decades ago. Robert passed away over thirty years ago, and her two children are now in their fifties. She shares the place with her charming pooch, Woody.

"There's so much love in this house, it took me 50 years to put together, why leave?" said Harbarth. She adds that she has the best neighbors and a sweet mailman who calls her regularly.

Not only is the house in good shape, but Peggy has kept her uniforms from her days as a World War II WAVE - Woman Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services and Grey Lady. The over sixty-year old tiny navy blue uniform was worn with white gloves, a sensible purse, a cap and matching skirt, never pants. Her Grey Lady dress is equally impressive.

She fondly remembers the feeling of patriotism in the country back in 1943 and wanted to do her part to serve the nation. So at age 23

she left her job as a telephone operator in New Brunswick, New Jersey to become a WAVE. She and her roommate, "one of my dearest friends," shared a tiny room with bunk beds one small desk and a little closet. The pair worked in the casualty department in Washington D.C. Harbarth recalls, "It was heartbreaking letting families know of the death of a young service member."

She was one of the few women to take the exam to become a Yeoman First Class, "I had to study from the manual and take the same test as the men," definitely challenging, but she passed with flying colors.

When the war was over and her service was complete she was anxious to be with her future husband, unfortunately he was stationed in Africa and subsequently Italy. Finally in 1947 he was shipped to California. After a four day cross-country train journey with her sister, the two married in a simple ceremony in Berkeley.

After settling in Lafayette she started a long and distinguished career as a volunteer for several social organizations. In 1953 she joined the Gray Ladies - Red Cross volunteers at Oak Knoll Hospital in Oakland. Following that, she was a Pink Lady for John Muir Hospital. She also worked helping battered women with Margaret Leshner. They became friends and worked at fundraisers for what would become the Civic Arts Building in Walnut Creek.

In addition, she has volunteered with the American Cancer Society and the American Legion, working to benefit veterans and underprivileged widows.

The Lafayette Rotary recently held a 90th birthday celebration in her honor. "A great surprise, though I was somewhat embarrassed," said Harbarth.

Her great attitude is apparent as she gives a visitor a tour of the house, "everything here is old, but so am I." Functional antiques can be found in every room, a poker table, dry sink, dough box, original kerosene library lamps. "You can still smell the kerosene," she mentions, husband Robert had them electrified many years ago. Equally unique are the labor intensive hand made rugs, curtains and lovely crewel and embroidery samplers.

Happy belated birthday, Peggy Harbarth! Look for her cruising around town in her gray 1977 Cadillac Seville; both the car and driver are in terrific shape.

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