

Published May 23rd, 2012

Card Bonanza for WWII Vet's 90th Birthday

By Cathy Tyson



Theron Nelson, 90, shows off 61 of the more than 600 birthday cards he received for his birthday
Photo Andy Scheck

No gifts, cards okay. Seemed simple enough - until the concept went viral. For his 90th birthday, Theron Nelson insisted he had enough stuff, so suggested no gifts. A simple card would be fine. His son Chris and daughter Debbie called that an "invitation to mischief."

The pair along with six grandchildren, friends and acquaintances spread the word, resulting in well-wishers from far and wide responding to their requests. With the help of Facebook, the Internet, and an outpouring of support from random folks - restaurant servers, barbers, bank tellers - an avalanche of cards found their way to the wry nonagenarian on Sweet Drive in Lafayette.

On his actual birthday, May 8, Nelson received 100 cards in the mail. Three days later his running total was 562 cards, and nearly a week later he had a total of 602 cards: post cards, birthday cards, and hand painted artwork. To date, Nelson has received 628 cards from 13 countries from across the globe including Bahrain, Finland, Germany, South Korea, Slovenia, France - even as far as Antarctica. Thirty-eight states plus the District of Columbia were represented, including one over-sized finger painting from a creative toddler.

Nelson also received a flag that was flown over the U. S. Capitol on his birthday (arranged by Senator Barbara Boxer). One of the more memorable cards was from retired General Eric Shinseki, head of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and former Army chief of staff, who took the time to hand write a thank you and greeting to Nelson.

The humble birthday senior citizen was thrilled with the effort; he was truly overwhelmed by the outpouring of good wishes.

Born in Sioux Falls, South Dakota in 1922, back when Warren G. Harding was president and a gallon of gasoline cost just 22 cents per gallon, Nelson has seen mind boggling changes in the world during his lifetime. When he was two years old, the family moved to Redlands, California for his father's job, serving on the faculty, and later as the Dean of Humanities, for Redlands College - now University of Redlands.

Nelson was lucky enough to get a college deferment for the early years of World War II - but was ultimately inducted and as he describes it enjoyed a "walking tour of Italy." In Anzio, Italy Nelson "got a little too close to a grenade, and got a free trip back to the U.S." earning a Purple Heart in the process. His injuries were quite severe and he ended up spending 18 months in rehabilitation. Following the war years, he completed his education at Stanford, garnering two degrees, one in sociology and one in psychology.

After graduating, he worked for the East Bay Municipal Utility District in the personnel and human resources departments for 18 years, and then moved to a position with the City of Concord for 24 years, ending his career as Director of Administration and Labor Relations.

He had no idea when he purchased his home back in 1950, surrounded by orchards at the time, that he and then new wife Liz would spend the next 62 years, and counting, in Lafayette. The Nelson family, like many others, bought a new reasonably-priced house, raised their children there and never left. Son Chris Nelson hasn't gone far - he now lives in Concord. Daughter Debbie Nelson lives in Porterville, south of Fresno. Four generations came together on Mother's Day to celebrate Nelson's birthday as well as all the moms in the family.

For three decades during his free time, Nelson was chairman of the Laf-Frantics, a theater group many old timers remember for its hilarious melodramas that raised funds for civic projects. As a thank you for his contributions, the City of Lafayette named him Man of the Year in 1957. He has many happy memories of the fun-loving group and lately has been busy putting together documentation of their productions for the Lafayette Historical Society. Some of the titles include "Hiss and Hearse," and as a spoof of the then popular Camelot, "Camelittle." Although the final curtain went down on the group in 1986, the cast and crew members still get together for an annual Christmas party.

Still active in his retirement, Nelson enjoys photography and is a member of the Diablo Valley Camera Club, receiving many awards over the years. Lately he's been busy travelling with his son Chris - returning to the battlefields of Italy, taking cruises down the Rhine and Danube rivers, and participating in photography-based cruises in Tahiti and the Marquesas. Daughter Debbie steps in to take care of Liz, who's unable to travel.

Nelson attributes his long life to simply keeping busy. No question - mission accomplished.



Theron and Liz Nelson on their wedding day Photo Mei Sun Li

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