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Bringing Smiles to the Faces of Seniors

By Diane Claytor



Fannie Custer and her adored grandsons, Carsten and Elias Ristow Photo provided

with life-threatening illnesses ... people who often feel they don't have much to smile about," she said.

This week, the foundation is reaching a milestone by granting its 150th wish. Lafayette resident Fannie Custer was diagnosed with incurable lung cancer in December. A long-time Florida resident at the time, Custer "left her home, her church, beloved hairdresser and library in Florida to move in with our family and get treatment in California," daughter Angela Ristow wrote in her letter to AEFW.

One of five children who grew up in West Virginia, Custer has always valued family and has been extremely close with her siblings. With only her two younger brothers left and both living in the Washington, DC area, Custer's wish was to be reunited with them. "She is looking forward most to the joining of generations with her brothers and her grandsons, ages 6 and 8," Ristow said. "Mom describes the comfort of family support as 'being wrapped in a warm blanket.' After seven months of the ups and downs of cancer treatment, this visit will be the perfect medicine."

AEFW coordinated the flights for Custer's brothers and, with the help of the Lafayette Park Hotel, arranged their accommodations. Although the visit will be brief, Ristow is so happy that her mother will have the memories of what will likely be this last family reunion. The plans, she said, are for "reminiscing, sharing stories and laughing." Custer said she wants her grandsons to play piano for her brothers "so they can see the boys' fingers fly across the keys."

Chapman noted that the majority of wishes the foundation grants deal with family. "An elderly person, facing the end of his or her life, typically wants to see family members or an old friend they haven't seen in a long time. They want to go back to that place they went on their honeymoon or the favorite spot they used to take the kids when they were all younger," Chapman noted.

Not surprisingly, Chapman has many heartwarming stories. One of her favorites is about a Moraga woman, who, remembering how she used to take a ferry to work in San Francisco, wished to take her granddaughters on a Bay tour. AEFW made the arrangements, including a limo ride

Donna, an avid Denver Broncos fan, wished to go to a game and meet the players. She did. Neil wanted to go fishing one more time. He did - and caught four catfish! Rudy, a train enthusiast, wanted to see his daughter in San Diego. Amtrak took him there. Frances, who was housebound, wished for a new computer to continue communicating with family. She received it.

These are just four of the 149 wishes granted by An Elderly Wish Foundation (AEFW), an Antioch-based nonprofit organization whose mission is "making senior wishes come true" throughout Contra Costa County. Conceived in 2000 by Rebecca Crowder, who saw the joy her terminally ill mother experienced on a trip to Reno so she could "play them one-armed bandits one more time," AEFW is headed by gregarious Mary Chapman, its first and only executive director. "I was asked by the founding board chair if I would help organize the project. Fifteen years later, I'm still organizing," Chapman said with a laugh.

Chapman loves her job. "How can you not love it? We bring smiles to the faces of older people

across the Bay Bridge. Several days after the trip, one of the granddaughters phoned Chapman to express her deep appreciation. "She told me that the memory she will forever keep is seeing her grandmother standing up in the limo, head sticking out the sunroof, singing the 'Star Spangled Banner,'" Chapman fondly remembered.

Crowder, AEFW's founder wrote, "The elderly still have dreams but they often don't feel worthy because of their age. ... The spark that comes with fun and laughter still shines in their eyes."

Ristow, dealing with the sadness that comes from knowing her mother will not be around to watch her grandsons grow up, echoes those sentiments. "In our culture," she said, "so often aging is passed off as irrelevant. But really, those lives - long lived and full of experience - deserve to be celebrated. Any day, at any age, can be the right time to make something joyful happen. I am so grateful to An Elderly Wish Foundation for creating a place that honors our elders."

For more information on An Elderly Wish Foundation, visit www.elderlywish.org or phone Mary Chapman at (925) 978-1883.

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