

The Daily Gleaner (Fredericton)

Hardworking and kindhearted; Positive outlook | Eleanor Stillwell, 78, has a calm, quiet strength that has helped her get through the difficult times in her life

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It's a rainy day at Yoho Lake and Eleanor Stillwell is making the most of it.

She is preparing for a day of some of her favourite things. Most days she gets up whenever it suits her. But today she's invited friends over to the camp to play cribbage.

So she gets up and gets ready for the morning card game. She makes tea and prepares snacks. Before the three other players arrive she has about an hour to talk about her busy, interesting life.

She was born in Devon in 1928, the third eldest of 10 children in Howard and Margaret Monteith's family.

Before she started school she recalls going to a blacksmith's shop beside her family's home where she'd sit and watch horses being fitted for shoes.

Her summers were idyllic. The family would move to Penniac where they owned a log cabin in the woods. With no electricity or running water she recalls it was a rustic life which appealed to her sense of adventure.

"It was wonderful!"

Some of her fondest early memories are of grade school.

"Mary Grannan was my first teacher. She had plays and she taught me a recitation because I couldn't talk plain."

When she was 14 she went on her first date. She'd been standing in the kitchen ironing a dress and wearing only a slip when her brother walked into the house with a friend.

Merlyn Stillwell was smitten and later asked her if she would like to go to the Gaiety Theatre to see a movie with him. She agreed. But they were too young to go steady. She started dating other boys and six months later he came back to her and asked her to see only him.

They dated until she started nursing school in Saint John in 1945 and he went to the University of New Brunswick. They decided to see other people while they were apart.

But it wasn't long before cupid brought them together as soon as she returned to this city in 1949 and started working at the Victoria Public Hospital. They married in April 1951.

Their first baby, Elizabeth, was born later that same year. When she realized the baby had been exposed to measles, she took her to the doctor who recommended she receive a gamuglobulin injection. But instead of helping, the sweet baby girl had an allergic reaction and died.

It was a very painful time in this couple's life and something, Stillwell says you never really get over. But life had to go on.

By now they had their second child. Brenda was born in 1952. Next Colleen arrived in 1954 followed by Marilyn in 1955. Two years later their first son, Peter, was born in 1957.

"I told the doctor if I had a boy he had to give me a kiss. After the baby arrived the doctor was walking out of the delivery room and I said 'Aren't you forgetting something?'"

Another baby boy, Roy, was born in 1959 and the baby of the family, Eloise, arrived in 1961.

Life in the Stillwell household was busy. Living in a home on Keswick Ridge, this mother's days were filled with meals, housework and piles of laundry.

But she always made time to play. In the summer they'd go to the drive-in theatre to see the latest releases. She and three friends would often get together to play bridge. She loved the outdoors and was happy to go along with her husband on fishing trips.

"My husband and I joined the curling club and we went skiing at Crabbe Mountain."

By 1967, after the kids were all in school, she decided to get out of the house as well. She went to UNB for a term. At first she thought she wanted to earn her nursing degree.

Then she opted to take a six-week refresher course at the Saint John General's School of Nursing.

For the next several years she worked at the VPH in the operating room. Next she went to work at York Manor. But after a year she felt she was burning out from being on the night shift. So she quit.

"I couldn't have kept it up. I would have been dead."

After a break she returned to work. This time in office administration at UNB's business office where she remained from 1973 to 1977.

Then she and her husband received news they hadn't been prepared for. He'd been diagnosed with bowel cancer.

"We had no idea. It was a shock. When I was told I said to the doctor he must be kidding."

For the next seven months she was at his side caring for him until he died at home surrounded by his family. After he passed away, she decided she wanted nothing more to do with medicine.

"I never wanted to nurse again. To see him go downhill the way he did. He was skin-over-bones by the time he died."

Once again in mourning for someone she loved, she had to pull herself together to take care of those around her.

At age 49 she knew life was meant to be lived so she moved from Keswick Ridge and took an apartment for a short time in Fredericton. Then she and the two youngest kids, who were in high school at the time, moved into a home. In 1978 she went back to work.

This time for the federal government in the unemployment insurance office in its investigations branch. It wasn't long before she knew she didn't care for the work so she quit.

In 1981 her daughter Colleen needed her so she packed her bags and moved to Vancouver and worked in an insurance office. But when her youngest daughter was getting married, she moved home and never returned to the west coast.

It wasn't long after she'd returned when love found her for a second time. She saw Eugene Chessie, a brother of one of her friends, walking along the side of the road and hitchhiking. She picked him up and, before long, they were an item. They married in 1990 and enjoyed 12 years together before he died in 2002.

For the past four years she has remained as active as ever. From April until the end of October she lives mostly at her cottage on Yoho Lake. When she isn't here, she lives in an apartment. Because it's only a 15-minute drive from the cottage to her winter residence, she is often there doing laundry and picking up her mail.

At age 78, she is feeling great. Although she tries to pay attention to her diet she has a particular fondness for sweets. So when she gets a craving, she says, she loves to indulge in dessert.

Stillwell's life is full and happy. One of her greatest pleasures is spending time with her children and 17 grandkids who range in age from 25 to three.

Over the past year she's been involved in helping to organize the Northside Heritage Association.

The reason I'm so involved with the north side is because all of my family is from that side of the river."

She hopes those who are interested will help in the work of creating a northside museum which showcase the people who lived there years ago including influential people such as her first grade teacher Mary Grannan. She is looking forward to the day this is a reality.

When she isn't rushing off to various northside heritage association meetings she can be found at home relaxing with one of her many books.

At the cottage, novels line the steps leading to its second floor.

She has a particular passion for James Herriott novels, mysteries and anything written about the St. John River.

Usually her 15-year-old dog Berkie, a black Lab and Samoyed mix, can be found sleeping on the floor by her side.

If it's not a book in her hands you'll see her with fine thread and a small shuttle she uses to create delicate tatted doilies.

There's a sense of calm around this woman. Everything happens in its own good time, she says, so there's no point in worrying about what will be and she's willing to take things as they come.

"When you're my age, you take life one day at a time. When you wake up in the morning and you're still alive you say: 'Well that's good!'"

By now her friends are at the door and they're ready to play crib. It's time to stop talking and start shuffling the cards, she says.

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