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## Valley researchers take a look at longevity

By Mary K. Reinhart  
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Lloyd Pearsall really did walk to school barefoot. Rosalee Sproul made ends meet by tending a garden and canning her own fruits and vegetables. Henrietta Pearsall was known in her neighborhood as the “Brownie Lady” and when she wasn’t baking, she was knitting, crocheting and sewing.



**CELEBRATION:**  
Activities director Linda Petty serves Rosalee Sproul a piece of cake as she celebrates her 105th birthday at the Citadel Care Center in Mesa on Monday.

Throughout their long lives - this week Rosalee turned 105 and the Pearsalls celebrated 75 years of marriage - they worked hard, traveled some, raised children and collected lovely antiques and even lovelier memories.

They also struggled through the Depression and outlived most of their children, siblings and friends.

So what makes the Pearsalls, Sproul and the growing number of Arizonans surviving well into their 90s and beyond different from those who don’t?

And what can they teach us about how to live not just a long life, but a good long life?

“I guess love is what it amounts to,” says Lloyd, gazing at his wife. “We’ve had a good family. We’ve traveled a lot and met so many nice people.”

More than 700 centenarians live in Arizona, and the number is growing at an astounding rate. Nationwide, there are about 85,000 centenarians and by 2040 there are projected to be more than 580,000, according to the U.S. Census.

The fastest-growing segment of our population are those 85 and older - a group that in Arizona is projected to grow by 102 percent between 2000 and 2020.

Researchers attribute these numbers to the huge wave of baby boomers, medical advances that have led to growing life expectancy (though that’s starting to level off) and, in Arizona, migration.

Setting aside the policy implications for health care, employment, Social Security and myriad other issues - and they are enormous - it’s clear that people who’ve lived longer have, to a large extent, lived healthier.

Dr. Walter J. Nieri wants to know how they’ve done it.

Together with his colleagues at the Sun Health Research Institute’s Center for Healthy Aging and a team from Arizona State University West, Nieri is studying the lives of people aged 98 years and older to learn more about healthy aging.

The researchers also need participants as young as 50 years to follow long-term for what is believed to be the first longitudinal aging study in Arizona.

Though many studies have looked at the physical aspects of old age, and chalked up about half of it to genetics and much of the rest to exercise and a balanced diet, Nieri’s research is more holistic, focusing on stress and psychological factors as well as physical health, and how they interact.

“We’re looking at their psychological makeup. How they’re coping with stress,” said Nieri, a geriatric physician and director of the aging center. “Particularly the fact that they’re getting older and they’re not as independent as they’d like to be.”

Nieri, who’s also medical director at Huger Mercy Living Center in Sun City, said depression can take hold as people age and the losses stack up: career, spouse, friends, home, independence.

“We just assume that they’ve reached that stage and they’re doing fine,” he said. “But a lot of times they’re hung up on the would’ve, could’ve, should’ve.”

Nieri encourages people to stay engaged and try new things, from politics to college coursework. Exercise, he says, can help people make new friends while keeping fit.

The longevity study, in cooperation with TGen, the Translational Genomics Research Institute, also will examine whether some people are genetically predisposed to handle stress better than others. Much like the 100-year-old man who visited Nieri this week and, just months after losing his wife of 67 years, still maintained his sense of humor and a positive view toward the future.

In addition to being born with good genes that enable them to avoid heart disease, diabetes, cancer and dementia, researchers are finding that people who age well also have good attitudes.

“They tend to be optimistic and have fun. They tend to let troubles roll off their backs,” said Dr. Mitchell Harman, founding director of Kronos Longevity Research Institute. “They’re not bitter. They don’t hold grudges. They don’t withdraw.

“Their basic attitude is, ‘Life is good and I’m going to have a good time.’”

Also, he added, “most of them aren’t fat, and most of them never were.”

Other than that, people in this age group, known as the oldest old, may not have much else in common. Women outnumber men by more than 2-1.

“Some of them smoked, some of them didn’t. Some of them exercised a lot, some of them didn’t,” Harman said. “It seems like they’re resistant to everything. They dodged. There’s no question that about half of that is having the right genes.”

They also aren’t any more likely to suffer a long, slow decline than are people in their 60s or 70s, Harman said. Research has shown that most people spend about two to three years on a progressively slippery slope toward death. Centenarians generally spend the vast majority of their years in pretty good health.

“So it really doesn’t matter. Whether you live to be 75 or 105, the amount of time you spend sick, frail and dependent is the same,” Harman said. “The real issue becomes, at any age, what can you do to enrich your life and stay healthy?”

At 105, Rosalee Sproul is in remarkably good health, though she had a stroke about four years ago and is slipping deeper into dementia. Granddaughter Linda Heimer of Queen Creek says Rosalee hasn’t called her by name in about 10 years, but otherwise has no health problems.

Dressed in a flowered dress and pearls, Rosalee sat serenely in her wheelchair Monday at Citadel Care Center in Mesa while everyone made a fuss and enjoyed birthday cake and punch. Among those congratulating her was a very spry 102-year-old Emily Schneider.

Emily's knees are bad and she uses an oxygen tank most days, but her mind is sharp. She gives much of the credit for her longevity to God, but also allows, "I've had a beautiful family."

Rosalee does, too. Though she's outlived two husbands and her two children, she has five grandchildren, nine great-grandchildren and 13 great-great-grandkids.

Heimer says her grandmother was canning and preserving food well into her 90s. She enjoyed playing the piano, painting landscapes of the nearby Superstition Mountains and quilting, and had little use for TV beyond the 10 o'clock news.

"She was real laid-back," said great-granddaughter Michele Walcott, of Mesa.

At 96, Henrietta Pearsall still knits three or four colorful doilies each day. Visitors to the Pearsalls' Scottsdale home are implored to take one or two home.

Lloyd, 98, tells wonderful, detailed stories of the early years at General Motors, where he not only drove a Dusenbergs, but met Mr. Dusenbergs. He helped with the development of air conditioning and adjustable seats and chatted with some of the country's elite as he drove them from the Detroit train station to the GM proving grounds.

He also remembers the day he worked up enough gumption to make his pitch to Henrietta as they approached each other on the street.

"I just kept looking at her," he recalls. "I said to my dad, 'I'm going to hit her up for a date.'" They were married at Henrietta's parents' home in 1933. Five years later, the couple bought their first home, in Brighton, Mich., for \$2,600.

This week their surviving son, Dennis, and his family came from Michigan and New York to help celebrate the Pearsalls' 75th anniversary. Hospice of the Valley, which helps care for the couple in their Scottsdale home, brought a cake, champagne and sparkling apple juice.

The Pearsalls have seen many changes over their long lives and, when asked, Lloyd says families don't seem to be as cohesive as they used to be, with children "farmed out" to others much of the time.

Mark Pearsall remembers watching his grandparents on camping trips, with Henrietta setting up the camp kitchen while Lloyd got ready for fishing. The couple had their own interests - she worked at a local bank and owned an antique store - but life mainly centered on the family.

"They each had their independence," he said. "But they were a good team."

Lloyd, diagnosed with congestive heart disease, has been receiving hospice care for nearly two years. He isn't sure why he's lasted so long, but is grateful for the years he's had.

"It's been a great trip."

