

## **Catching Health Podcast**

### **Conversations About Aging: Leona, age 92**

**February 25, 2019**

**Diane narration:** This is Conversations About Aging, a Catching Health podcast. I'm Diane Atwood. Today's conversation is with Leona, who's 92 and has lost most of her sight because of macular degeneration. It's the most common cause of blindness in people over 60.

**Diane:** I'm curious. You and I are sitting across from each other. We're maybe a foot and a half apart. What can you see of me?

**Leona:** I can't see your face. I see a person sitting in a chair, a silhouette.

**Diane narration:** Leona was close to 70 when she learned she had macular degeneration. Blindness descended gradually and relentlessly.

**Leona:** For a long while, I was ok, but I would say for the last about 10 years it's been bothersome. How is it bothersome? Well, I began to not see things accurately and I would, I didn't notice at first, but it didn't take long for me to realize that I shouldn't be driving anymore and I gave up driving. That was the worst sudden adjustment I had to make. Not driving is a terrible blow to your independence.

**Diane:** At that time how old were you when you had to stop?

**Leona:** About 83.

**Diane:** And you were very active?

**Leona:** Yes, yes. I worked until I was in my late 70s.

**Diane:** What did you do?

**Leona:** I was a special ed teacher, but I retired when I was close to 70 and then I subbed and did some grants and worked on some programs until I was, well until my sight began to go, until I was about close to 80.

**Diane:** So you didn't retire for the sake of retiring, you retired because of your sight?

**Leona:** Yes.

**Diane:** Now, this is the first time we have met in person. We just spent 20 minutes or more looking at the amazingly beautiful quilts that you made throughout your life and you can't do that anymore, can you? The colors were astonishingly rich and beautiful.

**Leona:** Colors are like nourishment, they were. I loved colors and it was doubly hard to lose the ability to enjoy them.

**Diane:** You also told me that you used to be a photographer.

**Leona:** Yes, I did that. That was my work before I was married and before I completed by Special Ed certification.

**Diane:** And when you were showing me around your apartment you were especially proud of some of the letters that you had received, like from Hillary Clinton, Harry S. Truman. That spans a few generations?

**Leona:** Yeah. And I met Eleanor Roosevelt once.

**Diane:** What was that like?

**Leona:** Oh, it was wonderful. She was a real hero of mine.

**Diane:** What prompted you to write letters to any of the politicians?

**Leona:** I don't know. Every so often, I write a fan letter.

**Diane:** And you heard back from these people, including Truman?

**Leona:** Yes, I have that letter from Harry Truman.

**Diane:** So, who would you write a fan letter to today, do you think?

**Leona:** I would to both Michelle and Barack Obama who I think both brought a great deal of dignity and common sense to the White House and are being so misinterpreted by the gang that's in there now.

**Diane:** You don't keep your views to yourself, do you?

**Leona:** You want to know how I really feel? Laugh.

**Diane:** So you've spent all of your adult life being outspoken about a lot of things, not just politics? Is that just who you are?

**Leona:** Yes, actually I never thought of it that way but it's true, I don't, yuh. I think you're right. I guess I have.

**Diane:** And what brought you to Maine?

**Leona:** My diagnosis, well, not just the diagnosis, but the symptoms that began to become troublesome, of macular degeneration. And I felt I wanted to be near at least one of my children.

**Diane:** Who happened to live here in Maine?

**Leona:** Right. So it was a question of which one, as I say, lost the toss.

**Diane:** If you didn't have the macular degeneration, you wouldn't need as much help or do you now at age 92 have other issues that prevent you from or might prevent you from being as independent as you want?

**Leona:** Well, right now, the things that are troublesome are all manageable, just. And the one that really changes my life completely is the vision loss, so if I didn't have macular degeneration I think I would probably still live in Fairfield or in Fairfield County anyway, in Connecticut.

**Diane:** So because of your blindness, you've had to give up a lot. You had to move out of your home, move out of state, give up driving, can't quilt, can't do photography. How do you sustain yourself? Spiritually, emotionally?

**Leona:** With great difficulty. I spend more time alone listening to books than I would choose to even though I am so grateful for the Talking Book program, which allows me to access all the current books and classics and just push a button and I don't pay for it. It's a free service.

**Diane:** So that's a saving grace for you?

**Leona:** Oh, it's wonderful, but it's the only thing that I do that I can do for myself that's recreation.

**Diane:** So on a day to day basis, you spend a lot of time alone?

**Leona:** Yeah, I do.

**Diane:** Do you have friends here? You left Connecticut and all your friends behind you.

**Leona:** I left all my friends behind me but I was very lucky. I have some wonderful friends. I've been here eight years and through yoga, which is something I do every week, I met a wonderful bunch of women. They're all younger, much younger than I, but they're very tolerant of my, you know, the fact that I slow everyone down or that I have to be picked up and dropped off if we're going anywhere, they're just wonderful, so I'm lucky.

**Diane:** How did you happen to start taking the yoga class? How did you even hear about it and get there in the first place?

**Leona:** Well that was through my daughter who lives here. She's also a yoga practitioner and I was in Connecticut, so she set me up in a class at the center she goes to, the Yoga Center and the yoga teacher and I have become very close friends so it's lovely..

**Diane:** So you still go to yoga every week?

**Leona:** I do.

**Diane:** And everybody in the class is younger?

**Leona:** Yes, I'm sure I'm the oldest in the class.

**Diane:** And they treat you just like you're one of the gang?

**Leona:** They're really, great.

**Diane:** To me that would be really important because it would be easy for you to feel because of your blindness because of your age left out and yet you don't feel that at all when you go to that class. That's wonderful.

**Leona:** Yeah, it's lucky, but I've found that Maine people are very helpful anyway, people just out in public, I can't tell you how often when I'm getting

in or out of a car and trying to maneuver, someone, a total stranger passing by, will come over and offer to give me a hand.

**Diane:** So you go out and about, you don't just go to yoga class? What else?

**Leona:** Oh, I love going out to lunch.

**Diane:** You go out to lunch?

**Leona:** I go out to lunch whenever anyone I know is willing to go, to do it, yeah, and my daughter and I occasionally go to the movies. I have to sit in the first row and I don't see much of it, but enough, so ... so it's worth it.

**Diane:** You are a resilient woman. There are other people who would be in your situation who wouldn't dare to go out the front door.

**Leona:** Well, it's funny because I think that I'm quite timid and I didn't used to be. The things I did for recreation were things that, well, I'm a scuba diver, I was a scuba diver, so I did things that were not really dangerous but adventurous things. I bought a houseboat in my 50s and moved onto it and lived on it for two years.

**Diane:** In Connecticut?

**Leona:** Yes, Connecticut.

**Diane:** A little chilly?

**Leona:** Pardon?

**Diane:** A little cold sometimes?

**Leona:** Yes, but I had heat put on, I mean it was a ridiculous use of money, misuse of money, but I must say, I had a good time. It was fun having the boat.

**Diane:** Your spirit, the spirit of Leona is still there. You've just had to make some adjustments? Well. A lot of adjustments.

**Leona:** A lot of adjustments.

**Diane:** One thing that I don't see in you, which could be present in somebody else, is resentment, anger, self-pity.

**Leona:** Well, if I've hidden the self-pity, that's good, but it's there and I go through periods of depression. Some days I think, I look back and I remember so many little frustrations that I guess anger is what I feel, uh, no, I'm not always good natured.

**Diane:** Well, you're putting on a good act today.

**Leona:** Well, that's also part of my life. I love to laugh and I love to meet people and talk to people and listen to people.

**Diane narration:** Leona lives alone in an apartment in the city. One daughter lives not too far away in another town. Another daughter lives overseas, and a third daughter and a son live out of state. They were all together recently and Leona says it was a wonderful visit. A caregiver comes in one day a week to help out. Leona thinks she might do well in an assisted living facility where she could be with other people, wouldn't have to worry about making meals, and would have more things to do, but the cost is an issue.

**Leona:** The main reason I think I would be closer to moving into assisted living if I could afford it, but so far I have not found a place around here that I feel I can afford.

**Diane:** I hope it works out for you though because I'll bet you if nothing else, you'll gain a social life and it seems to me that you would thrive in that kind of an environment.

**Leona:** I think so, too and there are choices of activities. Yes. Things I'd find interesting and just to be down in the lobby, in the common rooms out and about talking to people. Yes, it would be, would be nice, but at the moment I'm not counting on it.

**Diane:** So, loneliness is a big deal?

**Leona:** Yes, and it's not just loneliness. It's not being productive. I think that the overall negative feeling that I have almost all the time is that I'm not doing anything, I'm not giving anything, I'm not contributing anywhere to anything. Um, until a few years ago, both my work and a lot of my leisure time was spent helping other people because I was a special ed teacher and also a lot of my friends were older and needed more help than I did and now I just don't do anything for anybody.

**Diane narration:** That's not entirely true. Not too long ago, Leona tried to get her community to do something about its sidewalks. Even though she's blind, she manages to get out and walk in nice weather every once in a while.

**Leona:** It's not a regular thing that I do and the sidewalks really worry me. Because they're all bumpy? Yeah and because I broke a hip. You went down? Yeah, I fell in 2012.

**Diane:** So I see a letter writing campaign in your future.



**Leona:** Oh, I did that.

**Diane:** You did that?

**Leona:** Yeah, and they published it and it was really nice. They featured it. They had a picture of it in the letters to the editors.

**Diane:** They have a picture that features one of the letters. That you wrote?

**Leona:** Yeah.

**Diane:** About the fact that it wasn't a very age friendly community?

**Leona:** Yeah.

**Diane:** But other than getting the letter posted in the newspaper, has anything happened?

**Leona:** No and I had high ... I was over optimistic. I had and who knows whether the paper did get any more letters about the sidewalks, but they never published to my knowledge, they've never published another about, you know, and I was hoping it would start something and but it hasn't.

**Diane:** There are age-friendly communities in Maine. There's a lot of communities that are looking at that issue and trying to make their communities more age friendly.

**Leona:** Really?

**Diane:** There are several in Maine, so I'll get that information. I'll pull it together and give it to you.

**Leona:** Oh, thank you.

**Diane:** I'm going to ask you one more question.

**Leona:** Ok.

**Diane:** If you could share just one piece of advice that you think might enrich the life of a younger person, what would it be?

**Leona:** Laugh. Just hang out with people who make you laugh and who you make laugh.

**Diane:** Is it hard for you because of what you've been going through the last few years?

**Leona:** I don't laugh as much as I used to.

**Diane:** So it's time to follow your own advice? Right?

**Leona:** Right. But the friends that I'm making are all people who, who liked to see the world as. I mean we don't spend a lot of time telling each other our troubles. But besides laughing, loving is important. Having friends and family.

**Diane:** Leona, thank you.

**Diane narration:** You've been listening to Conversations About Aging, a Catching Health podcast. I'm Diane Atwood. To hear more conversations about aging and to read my blog posts on health and wellness visit [CatchingHealth.com](http://CatchingHealth.com).

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