

Conversations About Aging

Lavon Harris, 100

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Diane: Welcome to Conversations About Aging, a Catching Health podcast. I'm Diane Atwood and I'm traveling throughout the state of Maine interviewing people 60 and older about their perspectives on aging.

In this episode, you'll meet Lavon Harris, who lives in an assisted living residence in Bangor. Lavon was born in 1919. This past February, her children, who are in their 70s, threw a party to celebrate her 100th birthday. Imagine. 100 years old.

Diane: Did you ever think you'd live to be a hundred?

Lavon: Nope. Because I was sick a lot when I was young. And of course, back then they were behind in everything. But as I got older I found out that I had allergies and then I started getting the shots and after that, I had no problem whatever. But I stayed back twice in school because of my allergies. I'd get sick, you know, and now I have no problem whatsoever.

Diane: Where did you spend your childhood?

Lavon: In Guilford, Maine. I started I guess there as far as I can remember because I graduated from Guilford High School in 1938 and I loved school. In fact, I wanted to go back for a PG course. They used to call it postgraduate and I did that but, you know, all my friends had graduated. So I gave that up and started getting jobs, you know, here, there and everywhere I could get them.

Diane: What did you do?

Everything. I worked for a beautician, used to go and clean her place once a week. And that's what I mostly, I did, was clean places, a scrubwoman, you know. But I didn't mind it. I enjoyed it because I got to meet people, you know. I'd hear the conversations, they'd tell me a lot that I didn't know about them and I really enjoyed the work.

Diane: Did you work while you were raising your family?

Lavon: Yes, I did, but not in the very beginning because we landed up in Cicero, Illinois. My husband played ball, baseball, for the Red Sox, but in the minor teams. And it was about time for me to have our first child. And my mother's sister lived in Cicero, Illinois. So my husband and Warren Spahn, the famous pitcher, drove me up to my aunt's to stay until the baby came. My husband kind of

liked the area and I don't know if people realize, sometimes it takes a really, really long time for a man or a woman to break into sports. So he liked the area and he liked my family, my aunt, and the children. And so he found himself a job and we settled down and Cicero, Illinois. It's a suburb of Chicago and we liked it very, very much.

Diane: But World War Two changed things. Her husband Gip's younger brother was killed and felt compelled to enlist.

Lavon: And so we moved back to, to Guilford and no, I'll take that back. We moved back to upper Abbott where my folks lived and I stayed with them and he went into the service.

Diane: And he came back ok?

Lavon: Yes. Yeah. He didn't see any action at all.

Diane: He served three years and when he returned, became a licensed plumber. He was hired by Great Northern Paper Company and worked there until his retirement.

Diane: That must've meant stability for your family.

Lavon: Yes. Yeah. And he worked for Great Northern and we were living in Guilford and they traveled back and forth. But my two boys had already graduated and my girl was in high school and so I decided to move to East Millinocket. So Valerie went and spent two years, her junior and senior year up there and graduated from Schenk High School. Course, that was a busy town back then.

Diane: Sure. They're trying to revive it now, I think.

Lavon: Yes. Well, I don't know. I don't know if the mills, I don't know if the mills will ever come back. I hope so, but I don't know.

Diane: Did you like it up there then?

Lavon: I liked it wherever my family was.

Diane: How about being here in Bangor? How did you end up down here?

Diane: Are you here because your family's here? Are Your kids close by?

Lavon: Yes

Lavon: My daughter, and my youngest son is in the Veteran's home. Uh, he was a teacher and doing very well, but he had a stroke.

Lavon: My oldest son and his wife had a sporting business for years and he had people come from all over, you know, to hunt. And he still does it on a very small basis.

Diane: You know, it's, it's interesting, I have to say, you are the oldest person I've interviewed so far.

Lavon: No kidding.

Diane: And a lot of the people that I've interviewed are about the age of your kids.

Lavon: Oh really?

Diane: So it's interesting to hear you talk about your kids and they are over 60, too.

Lavon: Yes, right.

Diane: Are there other people in your family who lived to be a hundred?

Lavon: Not to my knowledge.

Diane: Do you have a secret? I have to ask because I'd like to live to be a hundred so I need to know what's the secret?

Lavon: I don't know. I don't have any idea, because like I said before, I was sickly a lot when I was a kid because of allergies.

Diane: Now that you take medication and you don't have to worry about that ... No, no,

Lavon: No. I'm just fine.

Diane: Are you healthy now other than allergies?

Lavon: I consider myself very healthy, for my age.

Diane: You seem to be very lively.

Lavon: Well, I'm not all that lively. I'm putting on a good front.

Diane: How are you putting on a good front?

Lavon: No, I'm not. I mean, I'm telling you the best I can and I've had such a good life.

Diane: How so have you had a good life? What's made it good?

Lavon: Well, my family's good except for my youngest son, course, he's taken care of, but I would be so happy if he was able to be on his own again, but that's never going to be.

Diane: Do you have any regrets? Is there something that you wish you had done that you haven't done yet?

Lavon: Nope. Well, yes, I suppose, you know, but I was happy with my life.

Diane: When you say suppose, is there something that still on your radar that well, I'd like to do that?

Lavon: Well, I wish in a way of that I had gone to college. But. I could have, but I didn't.

Lavon: I didn't go because, at that time, I didn't realize about that you could borrow money to go to school.

Lavon: I kind of wished that I'd had more of an education but I loved my husband and I was so happy to be with him. So that kind of covered up for the sorrow of not going to school and you can't have everything. I found that out in life.

Diane: What kind of work do you do now?

Lavon: I don't do anything. I'm the lady of luxury.

Diane: What does that mean? What's luxurious to you?

Lavon: Well, I get three meals today. I have my own little place. I've got my own bed, I take a shower every day. The girls bring me coffee in the morning and my friend supplies me with doughnuts all the time. So I don't go for breakfast ever anymore.

Diane: And you expect to live out the rest of your days here? You'll be content?

Lavon: Well, I hope so. I hope that's what I'll do.

Diane: Do you ever think about the end of your life or ...

Lavon: No, not really because I've lived such a good life, you know, I'm satisfied with whatever happens so long as I

don't die from a bad accident. But if I can die from natural causes. I feel very lucky, you know, to have lived so long and to see my kids live and grow up and do well. So I've had a very good life.

Diane: What are some things that you used to do without a thought that you can't do anymore?

Lavon: Dance. Oh God, I love to dance and my husband was such a good dancer. That's what attracted me to him. Oh, he was such a good dancer and I loved to dance.

Diane: What kind of dancing?

Lavon:

Well, Foxtrot, waltz, and they used to have a, a, uh, it was an old barn converted in Dover Foxcroft and we used to go down there in the summertime every Saturday night and over to Sebec Lake every Friday night. That was my weekend, Friday and Saturday night to dance.

Lavon: I loved to dance and my husband was such a good dancer. He was good at everything. He was good at baseball, he was good at basketball, he was good at love.

Diane: Did you dance for a long, long time? Even as you got older?

Lavon: Oh yes. I'd dance now if anybody would go with me. I'd probably fall down. Oh, I love dancing.

Diane: How do you see yourself now? How would you describe yourself as somebody who didn't really know you?

Lavon: Probably a satisfied old woman.

Diane: And if somebody were to ask your age and you told them you were 100, how do people usually react?

Lavon: Really? Really? Really.

Diane: Do you ever feel lonely?

Lavon: Yes, I am a lot. Miss my mother and my husband, you know. I miss a lot of others too, but mostly those two, yeah. My mother and I were very close.

Diane: And you had a really good marriage?

Lavon: I thought I had a good marriage. Yes, I was happy. Well, you know, we had our ups and downs like everybody but I was happy. Like I said, he was a good dancer. He

was a good worker. He was a good lover. So what's there to be upset about?

Diane: So at this point in your life, what makes it a good day for you?

Lavon: Well, I consider myself healthy, happy, sad because you can't live without sadness in your heart, you know.

Diane: Is there anything that you appreciate about being 100?

Lavon: I just think, oh my God, my mother must be so happy because a doctor told her that I wouldn't live to be very old.

Lavon: I'm very happy to have lived so long and to feel so good for my age. I could go right after you leave, who knows but I'm happy to have lived so long.

Diane: You lived long enough you must have learned some lessons along the way. Any advice to pass on?

Lavon: Well to live life to the fullest but be careful what you do. Have a good time, but be careful. Love life, but be careful. That's all I can say. I guess.

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