

Sue Hoyt, 73
Conversations About Aging
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Diane: Sue Hoyt began her life in Portland, Maine, moved to Peaks Island in grammar school and back to the mainland when she started high school. She graduated from Portland High in 1965 and spent a year in college. At 22, she married her high school sweetheart. They had two sons and lived in a nice little house in Durham, Maine. Then one day, her husband told her he'd like to build a log cabin in the woods.

I'm Diane Atwood and you're listening to Conversations About Aging, a Catching Health podcast. In my conversation with Sue, among other things, she talked about building that log cabin in the woods and raising her sons off the grid.

Sue: I never thought I would do that, but I ended up moving up to 50 acres of woods up in Dover Foxcroft and building a log house from scratch with no electricity. It was a lot of work. I worked really hard and my husband did, too. And the boys did.

Diane: They were little?

Sue: They will little. Yup. Josh was in second grade when we moved up there and Jay was in fourth.

Diane: So what possessed you to do that?

Sue: It wasn't me. I had a nice little cute house in Durham and I was really happy and we lived there seven years, but my husband decided he wanted to buy land and build a log house. And so we ended up selling our house and moving up to Dover Foxcroft and doing that. And it was, I worked really hard hauling. I got so I could take a 15 foot cedar tree three inches at the small end I got, it took a long time but I got so I could pick that up, put it on my shoulder and walk it out of the woods to the, to the truck. And one day it was like, wow, this doesn't even hurt. It's very heavy, but it doesn't hurt at all. Yeah, I know. It amazed me. I said, how'd that happen?

Diane: So you got physically stronger?

Sue: I got, I was getting physically strong. Yeah. I was, everything had was done by hand. I've every, every piece of food we ate, every loaf of bread was all homemade and it was cooked on a, um, on a cookstove. I had a nice cook stove and that was our heat and for cooking.

Diane: You could easily have put your foot down and said, there's no way that ...

Sue: I know, but that wasn't my nature and this was my family. I wanted to keep us all together and I just did what I had to do.

Diane: And was it a good time there? I mean, was it a good atmosphere for you to raise the boys?

Sue: Oh yes. Yeah. We read books. We'd go the library and get tons of books. We didn't have TV or even a radio. We'd get batteries occasionally so we could listen to radio for a short time. But most of the time we had books and we were out, we would, we'd go canoeing, we had a canoe, we'd go out and go fishing, camping, you know, things like that. That was what we did. And my sons to this day are very close. They do all those things. And um, and we were just really, the boys worked hard. We all worked hard. And then I taught them, I taught them how to cook, I taught him how to do all those things.

Diane: Did they go to school or did you homeschool? No, they went to school. They went to the school and Dover Foxcroft and they, both of them graduated from Foxcroft

Academy, um, and went onto the University of Maine, both of them.

Diane: When the boys were in college, Sue and her husband divorced. She was 47 and faced with the challenges of living in their log cabin off the grid by herself and figuring out how she would get on with her life. She decided to join her sons at the University of Maine in Orono and pursue a degree in social work. She quickly landed a job as a crisis worker.

Sue: I loved crisis work. And before I'd even graduated, so I didn't even have my bachelor degree yet and all the other crisis workers had masters and we're studying for PhDs and stuff and they offered me a full time job and I said, I can't do that. I've still got like another whole semester to go for, I've got papers to write. And she said, well, when we're not busy, you can use that computers and you can write papers. And I was like, wow. My head was in the clouds. I couldn't believe that they were.

Diane: They saw your ...

Sue: They did. And I don't, I don't know just what, how they saw it. I mean, I was just, I was just throwing myself into something new and it was exciting.

Diane: Obviously the right choice.

Sue: It was, it was, it was the right choice for me really. It was.

Diane: Did you work in the mental health field up until the time that you had to move up here?

Sue: Nope. No, I never did. I, um, I worked as a banker, an accountant and a bookkeeper for a few years. And then I raised my kids for a number of years until they were like in junior high school. And so no, I never had. But I do have, uh, I have a history of mental illness in my family and a lot of my closest, closest relatives have schizophrenia. So that I grew up with that in my life, y'all know, you know, seeing that and living with that with many people, seven, eight of my closest relatives. So I think that's why I was so interested in that in mental illness and why I was so good working with people who were in crisis. Cause I would listen to them, I wouldn't judge them and working with them, I would try to find something good for them, you know, so that they would be in a safe place. Whatever was happening at that time, their life.

Diane: After about three years as a crisis worker in Bangor, Sue decided to move back to Portland. She worked at Shalom House, which provides housing and an array of services for people with serious mental illness. But in 2010, she became ill.

Sue: I began to get sick and then I ended up in the emergency room and I was very close to dying. They thought, from kidney. There was a kidney disorder. And so they did tests and my creatinine level was really, really high and said I couldn't go until it was down. And it did come down eventually, but they never knew what, what happened. I know I had a ton of liquids that they pumped into me, um, and meds they gave me, but I, I never knew just what I had. I don't think they knew, but I got better, I got better and I was doing well. And then my sons lived up this way in the brewer area and so they said, mom, you got to come up here so you can be close to us when we can help you.

Sue: They're now 46 and 47 years old.

Diane: Can you believe it?

Sue: Yes. And I'm very proud of them. They're both great, great. They have families and jobs, great jobs and they're

just, and they're very helpful and kind and good to me and to each other, they're very close to each other, also.

Sue: So I moved up here less than a year after my kidney failure. I moved up here.

Diane: You've been here how long?

Sue: I've been here eight years now.

Diane: And are you happy here?

Sue: Yes I am. I'm content. I'm very content. I've made a new life for myself here. I do the senior companion program through the University of Maine. Um, and I also volunteer at Food and Medicine, which is a really great agency that helps people. Um, and I keep busy and I'm doing pretty good.

Diane: And did your boys and other people think good, this means that she's gonna just settle in?

Sue: Probably they did. Probably they did, but I, I just knew that I had to do something and I knew there were volunteer jobs. I mean, there's agents, hospitals, and all

kinds of agencies that are, you know, would love to have somebody be a volunteer with them.

Sue: I just wasn't ready to just sit home and wait for my turn to die. And that's how I thought about it. Okay. Am I ready now to just sit here and you know, just watch TV or you know, just go to the store once in a while and just wait for my turn to die. And it was like, I think I, I think I need to do something. I think I need to help. And I didn't know just how, but I needed, I needed to do that. That's what I did for all those years as a crisis worker and his case manager or even a housing specialist, those were all helping things.

Diane: As a volunteer with the Maine Senior Companion program Sue visits and helps people who can no longer get out on their own.

Sue: Right now I have five clients I visit through the every week. So I'm busy every day.

Diane: You go and visit clients and they each have different needs?

Sue: Yes, they do. Some people, some of my clients are in assisted living, some are in their own home and some

just need me to someone they can call if they, if something comes up or they just, I just go and spend two or three hours with them and talk. We reminisce, you know, just, it's, that's all I do. It's just I visit people and then some of my clients need me to take them to the grocery store or to the doctors or whatever comes up that they need. And I do that. I take people.

Diane: So you're giving something ...

Sue: It's kind of like being, it's a continuation of being a case manager in many ways but with a lot less responsibilities.

Diane: So you're giving something to these people but you're getting something?

Sue: Oh yes, definitely. Definitely. It's fulfilling inside of me. You know, I feel like I'm doing something positive and good, but also I keep walking and I have arthritis and stenosis in my neck and my back and I have a lot of, my shoulders are all shot.

Diane: From all those cedar logs you carried?

Sue: Yes, I know, I know. So and I've found that the more I walk like going to the grocery store and walking all around and I help people, like some of them are really, you know, unable to get things off high shelves or low shelves. And I'll say, what do you need? You need this here or there and I'll help them while I'm, while I'm shopping with them. And so I find that walking continuously working and walking and being busy really helps me.

Diane: I'm going to also interview one of your clients. Lavon. She's 100.

Sue Yes, she is. She was 100 in February.

Diane: And what does she give you?

Sue: She, she and I are best friends. I've been with her, she was my very first client with the senior companion program and it was in July of six years ago, whatever year that is. And so we have been she was living on her own in a trailer and she moved. She and I have gone all kinds of things and we're like best friends in many ways. We go up to Anglers up in Hampden.

Diane: Is that a restaurant?

Sue: It's a little restaurant up in Hampden and they have um, squash, which is just a little side order of squash, you know. But she and I go up there just to have that squash and in fact the waitresses ... oh, here come the squash ladies.

Sue: Another place where I volunteer is for Food AND Medicine up here. It's a it's a nonprofit, um, grassroots organization and we, I'm on the food access committee and I have been for now about four going on five years. And we came, we decided we wanted to do something to help people get healthy, affordable food. That's the whole basic concept of the food access committee. So we were sitting around talking about it and there were only three or four of us on the committee, but we are talking about it and I said, you know, it would be nice if we put in nice raised gardens.

Sue: We got Bangor housing, Brewer housing, all these different organizations around town. If they would allow us to put those raised gardens in where all the people who need, you know, healthy good, affordable food, I think that would be a good idea. So one of the workers and I went over to Bangor Housing and we presented at our, our plan of what we like to do and it ended up happening.

Diane: Is there somebody when you were younger who had an influence on you, helped shape you?

Sue: I think that would be my grandmother. was very close to my grandmother. I'm more close with her than most anybody. I lived with her for a whole year. I went to junior high school, ninth grade and lived with her cause I'm, I grew up very poor, oldest of seven kids. And um, my mother was a single mother and she, we, so we were very poor and I ended up living with my grandmother and she, she was very helpful. Um, and she, she did in her way, shaped me in that she had really good qualities about her. She worked hard. She walked to work. Even when she was in her seventies, she walked, she worked on Brighton Avenue. She lived up top Brighton Avenue. She had to walk all the way down to the, she worked at Dyer and Dyer cleaners at the bottom of Brighton Avenue there. And she'd have, she walked every day to go to work and she just, she just influenced me in those ways that her life was different than my mother's life was. And um, and she taught me a lot. She taught me a lot about cooking and just everything,

Diane: Do you have any advice or words of wisdom for people of any age?

Sue: I don't know. The only thing I know is it was very helpful for me and I don't know how you'd be able to do that, but to look at life as an adventure. Everything you do is an adventure, whether it's good or bad, it's all an adventure and it's all whatever it is that's its value, you know what I mean?

Diane: You've been listening to Conversations About Aging, a Catching Health podcast. I'm Diane Atwood. To get more information about the organizations that Sue volunteers with, to listen to other conversations about aging and to read my blog posts on health and wellness visit CatchingHealth.com.

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