

Conversations About Aging

Shirl Weaver, 82

July 15, 2019

Diane: Welcome to Conversations About Aging. I'm Diane Atwood and I'm traveling around the state of Maine talking to people about their perspectives on aging. Today's conversation is with Shirley Weaver, actually Dr. Shirley Weaver. She has a PhD in education and medical sociology. She would much rather be known as Shirl.

Shirl Weaver was born 82 years ago in Minnesota. After serving in the Air Force for 10 years, she came to Maine in 1985 to begin a new career. She founded the Maine Area Health Education Center Program and was the founding director of the Maine Geriatric Education Center at the University of New England or UNE College of Osteopathic Medicine.

When she retired from UNE in 2002, she embarked on another career — as Associate Director of Harvard's Geriatric Center.

Now really retired, she manages to keep busy, very busy — always learning and always contributing. She took some time out, though, to sit and chat with me about her

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life ... her careers — including one as a pinsetter in a bowling alley — the volunteer work she does now, and, of course, her perspective on aging.

We sat in the living room of the lovely old home she and her spouse own in Kennebunk. It's where Shirl Weaver, now 82, intends to live as long as she possibly can.

Shirl: I really like this area and I'm doing things hither and yon, volunteer work that makes it really important.

Particularly with regard to what do you do with your life after you retire about three times. And then, it's just really important to be connected in some kinds of ways and the geography, is wonderful. It's easy to get the Boston, it's easy to get to wherever you want to go.

There's just lots of reasons to be right here and doing our thing. You know, it's a lot of property for two women to maintain, but we do. I've only recently given up doing all the painting of the house outside and glazing of the

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windows. And that, but we still do all the lawn and the three acres of property to keep up and so we're kind of busy with that.

Diane: I'm guessing that you've thought ahead as to, you know, okay, what if we can't maintain this? What if one of us gets sick? Or are you just, you got things in place so that you'd have to really be dragged out of here kicking and screaming.

Shirl: I think financially we're set to be able to deal with that. We built what we call the barn room cause that was the old barn out there. And we built a room out there that has a bath. And so it's right on the same level otherwise upstairs, you know. But, we nurture a large group of friends, we all help one another and so that's kind of our family. A huge network of friends.

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Diane: That, to me, would be really critical. We really need to have whatever you want to call family, somebody that we can call or who looks kind of looks out for us.

Shirl: Right. But see, I do that for other people too.

Diane: How so?

Shirl: Well, I'm a member of Vet to Vet, so I'm a military veteran and we're paired with other military veterans that need some connection or their family's think they need some connection. My current vet is a World War Two veteran and she's in the Southern Maine Veteran's Home. But it's, it's another connection. And because we're both military, we can talk military and we can really ask questions that typically veterans, either they don't want to talk about it or they know it doesn't make sense because the other person doesn't have a frame of reference. And so it's a companionship and we also have a fair amount of training so that we can link them to resources if they need

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them. And then here in Kennebunk, I'm a member of the age friendly community. And so, well tomorrow I'll take somebody shopping, grocery shopping. I do that once a month with her and then some other people I take on a periodic basis. I have a friend who is not in either of those systems in our support group and she has cancer and a whole bunch of other sorts of medical things. And because I've been in the medical world for 50 or 60 years, I go to all of her chemo, I go to all of her medical appointments with the docs. She's completely capable and she's smarter than I am, but she's perfectly capable of doing all that. But it's, it's that support. It's just that connection.

In the old days you'd think someone my age would be the person that's at home and people are coming to help. I'm out, you know, if somebody calls and says they need their trash, picked up, our network for age friendly, they know I'm the only one has a pickup. So I'm the one that drives over it. Yes. So you know, you're, you're engaged and involved.

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Diane: So tell me about when you moved to Maine and you took the job. I would like to know about your, your career path.

Shirl: Well, immediately out of college I went to graduate school and Florida and through a series of different kinds of jobs that was related to that. I went into the Air Force and in the Air Force for 10 years, essentially six years on active duty. I was the director of hospital laboratories. And in that process I went to some more graduate schools under the Armed Forces Institute of Technology and I came out off active duty. I taught at a medical institute and I got another graduate degree.

Diane: In what?

Shirl: In higher education, but most of it was in hematology because of my background. So I have graduate training in microbiology, exfoliative cytology and

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hematology. And then I got a job in Michigan at a University and followed through with some projects there. I ended up doing my doctorate at Michigan State and worked in the College of Osteopathic Medicine there as I got that degree. And then that led me to a position here at UNE.

Diane: Teaching?

Shirl: Not teaching. Thank God. I'm a terrible teacher.

Diane: It's good to know what your strengths and weaknesses are.

Shirl: I was recruited to start a federal grant project called the Area Health Education Center Program. And so what we did was we identified primary care docs all over the state of Maine in rural areas, smaller the town the better. And we placed students there for a month in rotation, either the third year or their fourth year and we recruited

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people in town to host the students and house them. And in that process we set up an independent center that actually did all the real hard work. And then we did some faculty development for those docs that are out and about. And you know, that kind of stuff. When I retired from UNE, I had already started to work with Harvard to set up a Geriatric Education Center for UNE. So when I retired from UNE, I went to Harvard to be the associate director of the Harvard Geriatric Education Center.

Diane: You moved down there?

Shirl: And I commuted back and forth. (Diane: and you were living) here and just take the train down. You know how that is. In the process here, I got another graduate background, certificate in advanced graduate studies in Gerontology.

Diane: After Harvard, did you retire? You said you're retired three different times.

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Shirl: Well, I got out of the military, I retired from UNE, and I retired from the Harvard Geriatric Education Center, but I have not retired from being a student of healthcare, policy, of social stuff. I'm on the board of the medical, uh, the Maine Health Access Foundation. And so, and I've been doing stuff with them for almost 12 years now. So you really have to keep up.

Diane: Were you instrumental in getting the age friendly community ... I'm not sure what the name of that. Is that the exact name of it here?

Shirl: Yeah, ours is called No Place Like Home, but it is an age friendly community. I helped write the grant and work with AARP to get Kennebunk established.

Diane: So, to be recognized by AARP as an age friendly community. There are certain criteria that you ...

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Shirl: Correct. Yup.

Diane: Now that you're older, do you ever notice people making assumptions about what you can and can't do?

Shirl: Oh, absolutely. I think there's, um, I think it started when I turned 80 and all of a sudden at the grocery store, they're saying, would you like me to carry this out for you? And I want to smack them, you know, or how heavy would you like us to make the bags?

Diane: Why do you want to smack them?

Shirl: Because it's a generalization. It doesn't necessarily have to do with me. They're reading gray hair and wrinkled skin or something. I don't know what they're reading. But mostly, I go through the grocery store and I'm helping people reach top stuff. I don't have an image of myself and probably no one does. You probably don't have an image of yourself at your chronological age. I was just in Italy for

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two weeks. Just got back Monday and had a 24-year-old niece with me and she was pooped at the end of the day and I kept up. We walked 15,000 steps every day.

Diane: So how do you want people to talk to you or to treat you?

Shirl: As if I were just an ordinary, maybe 45 year old or something? There's a thing that happens and I have friends that are just the nicest people in the world, but once they know my age, they're like well, watch the step Shirl or they're always trying to do something or protect me from something. And it's so easy to buy into that and what's called learned helplessness and that's part of that business of the bagger at the grocery store. I don't want people to do that stuff for me. I'd rather struggle with it and figure out how to do it because who knows what I might have to do to maintain myself if something happens to my spouse or whatever happens. You need to, I need, you don't, I need to stay on top of stuff. I need to know what's

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going on in the world. I read the AMA news every day and send stuff to my students and you just need to be on top of stuff. Otherwise you're so vulnerable to all sorts of stuff. Most of it being giving up on yourself or giving up on your circumstance.

Diane: And so by buying into it, it's sort of like giving up a little bit?

Shirl: Yes, it does.

Diane: And it's incumbent on you to be able to say to that person with as much respect as you can, no, I can do it, but thank you for asking. Interesting. Do you think that the way we act influences how people treat you?

Shirl: Oh, absolutely. But I think there are circumstances like the bagger at the grocery store. They've also been probably instructed to be thoughtful and mindful about this

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kind of stuff. So they're doing what they've been taught to do. It's just how that all plays out.

Diane: When you were younger, did you ever imagine what it might be like to be older?

Shirl: No.

Diane: Was there anybody when you were growing up or anywhere along the way who had an influence on you kind of helped shape who you are today?

Shirl: I was raised by a single mom. My brother was four years older than I and she worked nights. And so I grew up being very independent and I worked full time from the age of 12, doing what everybody does at 10 or whatever you do, delivering papers. I tried out being a waitress at 12, because I was tall and I had just half a day and everybody was ready to throw me out, including me.

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It takes a sorta something I just don't have, I'll tell Ya! And I started setting pins. We lived next door to the bowling alley and so back in those days you sat down in a little pit and you picked up those pins and put them in the right thing. I was really good at it and the men's league always asked for me. So I did that until I started working at the drug store and I worked at the drugstore all through my high school years. And then I had three jobs and college. I was doing a pre med in three years and I had three jobs and on the swim team. So I've always been kind of a busy person.

Diane: Lots of events have occurred in your lifetime. Are there any particularly meaningful events that shaped how you ended up living out your life?

Shirl: My mother remarried when I was 13 and this little man had a fourth grade education, he was a superintendent at the power plant in our little town. Everybody knew him, everybody loved him. And he was

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just, he and I built an addition onto our house and everything from cutting the trees and planing the wood you know, the whole thing. And he was so gentle and just, he had boundaries. But the way that he put them up, it's like he could see them and see through them and figure them out, you know, he was just, he was just an amazing, amazing fellow.

Diane: You've told me that you're an introvert, but you have a social life, you have a circle of people. So what do you appreciate most about your social life?

Shirl: I guess the diversity of the people, their personalities and how they go about life. How they maneuver through life. Very interesting. Some are angry, some are just busy loving people and then people, they're just sort of ... it's just really fascinating.

Diane: The loneliness question. Do you ever feel lonely.

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Shirl: Have I ever felt lonely?

Diane: Especially now that you're older.

Shirl: No, no, no, no, no, no none.

Diane: What makes it a good day for you?

Shirl: Good day? I don't, I've never had a bad day in a long time, so I really haven't.

Diane: You always have something going on?

Shirl: Yeah.

Diane: One way or another. Even if it's just sit here and read a good book or be outside on your tractor, or help somebody.

Shirl: Yup.

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

Shirl: Oh, I sure do. I'm much more likely to say something than just thinking it and I have a weird sense of humor and I'll just act on that.

Diane: How about anything that you worry about or fear about the upcoming years?

Shirl: No, I just went through this, I just had cancer surgery and the people around me are all falling apart. I was, there's nothing you can do by falling apart. We just have to go through this stage and that stage and then we'll, then they'll do this and then we'll find out what that was.

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Diane: Do you mind my asking where you are in this trajectory here. You've had surgery. Did you have to have

...

Shirl: I had surgery in April, middle of April.

Diane: Do you have to have radiation therapy or chemo?

Shirl: Not at this stage.

Diane: That's good. Glad to hear that. Hope it stays that way.

Shirl: I do too.

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

Shirl: Know yourself and be yourself.

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Diane: Being true to who you are and not sacrifice your true self to what somebody else might want you to do, say, think, be, whatever?

Shirl: Right.

Shirl: I try to be myself with the medical students or anybody I'm around — on the boards or whatever. And probably most often it makes no sense to anybody, but every once in a while I'll get a, I got an email not just a week before I left from one of my students and she's a resident now. And she said, I just wanted to tell you, you're one of my mentors and one of my role models for you know, just comes. I don't think one aspires to be that. I think one just is themselves and if the other person makes some connection or learns something. Or even if it's I don't ever want to ever be like Shirl Weaver. That's still a learning. An important one.

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Diane Keep on learning — no matter what your age. I hope that you are learning something from listening to these Conversations About Aging. I'm Diane Atwood and I've been talking with Shirl Weaver, who is 82 and constantly learning new things.

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