

# catching DIANE ATWOOD health

## **Conversations About Aging**

**August 12, 2019**

**Leona Chasse, 95**

**Leona:** My name is Leona Bright. My maiden name is Leona Lillian Bright. Born January 4th in Cornish, Maine. January 4th, 1924.

**Diane:** Welcome to Conversations About Aging. I'm Diane Atwood and I'm traveling around the state of Maine interviewing people 60 and older about their perspectives on aging. What a gift I've been given — this opportunity to hear people's life stories and to gain new insights and wisdom about growing older or as some people prefer to say — living longer. Take Leona, for instance. She's currently under treatment for two cancers ... skin and breast cancer and it's not the first time. Far from it. Yet she exuded joy and gratitude — for my visit and interest in her story and for simply being alive.

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And wait 'til you hear what she did during World War II. I hope you enjoy my interview with Leona Bright Chasse, age 95.

**Diane:** Well, thank you Leona, for inviting me into your house. You're quite a collector, aren't you?

**Leona:** I am beyond belief, I am a rat pack, but I always say most of my clutter is folded so I get away with it better than most people who just throw it into the corner into a whup-di-doo.

**Diane:** We are in Cornish, Maine, which is a lovely little community. You were born and raised here?

**Leona:** Yes.

**Diane:** What was it like for you when you were growing up here?

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**Leona:** In 1924, you could probably sit in the center of route 25 and read the Press Herald, Sunday Press Herald, there was so little traffic, there were a few cars.

**Leona:** I would spend most of my time in the woods, I guess, collecting lady slippers, Jack in the Pulpits and climbing stone walls. High school was all in one building. I went to first grade through 12, right there in that building. And we didn't have a lot of sports events, but I'll show you a horseshoe that I played in high school, very impressive, not just I, but three other girls. We didn't have a football team. We had a baseball team and uh, speaking contest and the horseshoes, and just a few things like that. There were a couple of more academic type things we had, but I didn't, I wasn't a student. I hated school, except boys and sports, and you know. We swam at Long Pond. Ooh, Long Pond. I jumped off the river, the Ossipee River bridge with the high school boys right after high school, right after graduation. And I think, I was, we haven't been able to find

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any other girl who ever did that. And let's see. Well it was wonderful. It was wonderful. It was the, I wasn't rich, but I had a very good, nice mother and a sister and friends and it, it was what it was supposed to be.

**Diane:** is your sister still alive?

**Leona:** No, I have.

**Diane:** There's a picture of her so we can see a picture. And there's a picture of you as I think a teenager that you showed me. You were a tomboy.

**Leona:** Apparently. I did. I learned a lot. Diane, you have made a complete change in me. I have dragged out pictures and junk and I didn't know about the impressive horseshoe caption under the picture. And I had long since if I did, I didn't bother to read it. And uh, I have discovered things about myself, I guess probably at 95, you forget a

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lot. And then, uh, you brought it all back to me. Uh, my knee, my knee gave out because of it. But uh,

**Diane:** Oh dear. Because what? You were rooting around in your boxes and things?

**Leona:** I was on it for three or four days and I did, I don't, I don't get that much exercise. I wish I did, but I'm going to work on it. You've given me a whole new life.

**Diane:** You've made my day with that.

**Leona:** At 95.

**Diane:** Well, so let's get back after high school. Did you go to, was it called, college back then?

**Leona:** Well, it, I didn't, I was happy that I didn't have enough money to go to college because I didn't like school, but President Roosevelt signed a order to organize

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a woman's Navy. And I said I don't want to go to college, but boy, if I could join the Navy. And I said, could I, a little girl from Cornish, Maine get to the, wherever you would have to go? And I said, well, lots of 18 year old boys have had to do it, I don't know why I can't. So I started thinking about it and I wanted very much to be in the Navy and but ... to get into the Navy, the women had to be 20 years old. The boys could be 18, but the women had to be 20. Well, what am I going to do? So my mother, there was a factory in the next town in Limerick, nine miles away that made yarn to go into blankets and uniforms and whatever needed for these military people. And I, we, went on a little putput bus. Of course, the gasoline was rationed, tires were rationed, et cetera, et cetera, and I think it used to do a round robin between Limerick and Parsonsfield and Cornish. And my mother and I worked in there and I was a doffer. I guess my mother was too.

**Diane:** Let me pause here for a minute to explain what a doffer is. A doffer is someone who removes or doffs the

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bobbins and spindles that hold cotton or wool from a spinning frame and replaces them with empty ones. Leona made about \$18 a week as a doffer at Limerick Mills.

Then she and her mother heard about Quoddy Village in Eastport, Maine. In the late 30s and early 40s, the National Youth Administration used Quoddy Village to provide vocational training to young people. It was part of the Works Progress Administration or WPA started by Franklin Roosevelt. Leona chose to learn about communications. But she didn't stay too long at Quoddy Village.

**Leona:** I ended up going only about a few months because I graduated when I was 18 and I had to be 20. That was in June of course. And so we went off to Limerick Mills to work and then we went to Quoddy and I'm 20 before you know it, I was 20 the 4th of January and by the 5th of January I was a sailor.

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**Diane:** So you never lost that desire to join the Navy?

**Leona:** Never. Never, never. I wanted to be a sailor.

**Diane:** Were there many women in the Navy at that time?

**Leona:** At my particular, I was, we were always different. We weren't just sailors, we were in a group that is so secret. It is above top secret. It did not exist. When you look through the material, it simply did not exist. 6,000 women. The waves even built the decoding machine that I worked on called a bombe and a, B, O, M, B, E, I believe. And it was so secret. Anybody could do it. You'd turn disks. I'll show you the machine, a picture. We weren't allowed to know what we were doing. First of all, the machines were built in Ohio, closed and, along with National Cash Register and a group of very technical, they had to build the machine. There's a young man who was very special and it was so secret that when the Waves ... and it has miles of wiring, of course, I don't know what it

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did to this day. I only what I read because we weren't allowed to know what we were doing.

**Diane:** Let's go back to the beginning. When you first enlisted. Okay. How did you land in the secret group, what set you apart do you think?

**Leona:** Uh, I'll tell you what set me apart. I went, uh, was enlisted, I enlisted in Boston and went to boot camp at Hunter College in New York. And uh, when I was dismissed, when I was finished there. I was given an aptit ... whatever, some kind of a deal to find out what ... there were a couple of choices anyway. And uh, they, uh, told me that [I could get a, um, oh dear, that] I could, could go to Miami University. What's the name of that place in Ohio?

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**Leona:** National Cash Register, Dayton, Ohio that I could go to college there to learn how to repair aircraft instruments.

**Diane:** Wow.

**Leona:** But no. Oh, it was, that wasn't it. It was a cover up to go and build one of those bombes or build on those bombes. That was all it was.

**Diane:** And a bombe was really like a decoder.

**Leona:** It was a huge machine. And uh, yeah, it was the decoder and I don't know, it was, I can't remember if it was up against, it was built so we couldn't know what was happening with it.

**Diane:** But let me understand. So when you went to this school, you didn't even know what was happening. You

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thought you were going to learn how to repair airplane instruments?

**Leona:** No, I didn't go. I chose instead on this aptitude thing, uh, uh, Washington DC. I told, I chose communications. I said, no, I don't want to make, I don't want to repair. I would have been good at it. Maine people are known for that, what they do with the hands. And uh, and so no, I want communication. Never dreaming what I was getting into.

**Diane:** And they let you go. They didn't say, no, no, no. We want you to go to Ohio.

**Leona:** They let me do, they let me choose and I went to Washington at the naval communications annex out by the Naval Observatory and we were in waves, barracks D across the street, a nearby. Walking distance and it had two uh, check points was not unlike a prison. It was in, I would say some kind of little prep school with brick

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buildings and the chapel. I remember that chapel, I'll get back to that, but I remember that chapel because we went over one morning, we marched everywhere by the way. We were in a platoon or whatever in march and we had a lecture and they said this is secret. You are not going to come up with any secrets, anything that you did just because you women doesn't save you. We are going to be treated just like the men were,

**Diane:** Which is probably, that was probably, that was it.

**Leona:** Yeah. Yeah. I don't know death or what, but I remember that little chapel. But to get back to where I worked, they were low brick buildings, seems like and cement and steel with the machine in it. The huge big machine in the, and I don't know an in my, where are my little square had a machine and a bench, a wooden bench, just like a plain old barn bench and uh, that we could sit down on and I believe there was another area where girls and even civilians, maybe, and civilian men sat down to

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tables to work on the code. I don't, I just, from the reading, uh, of the material, the only thing I know about what I did mostly was from what I read in publications.

**Diane:** You mean when you were actually working, there were a lot of mysteries, things that you didn't know?

**Leona:** We didn't know anything.

**Diane:** So what were you doing actually?

**Leona:** We did, this is what I did, I think. This was a long time ago. There were disks just about the size of your hand metal. oh, I don't know what were they? Aluminum, they weren't aluminum. Shiny, not shiny, but steel. And there are a number of them on the machine and apparently, we were handed a strip of paper to set these disks on the machine and apparently somebody ran through a tape, a long tape with all this code on it that came from the Enigma machine that the Germans were

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making their code on. And we would apparently, I don't know if if there were, I don't know. I don't know. I'm assuming part of it was on a wall apparently that was hidden from me.

**Diane:** So you never even saw you just sat at your station.

**Leona:** I saw the front of the machine, that was it.

**Diane:** Did you ever feel that you were doing something really important?

**Leona:** Yes, and as a matter of fact, I mentioned, I don't know whether I just said it to you, anybody could have done what we did, but it was so secret of having just at 20 years old of having to carry the burden of that secrecy was the most difficult part of all. I'm not a gossiper, you know, a flyabout or anything, but it just, the responsibility was unbearable. It was, I didn't like it.

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**Diane:** How long did you do it?

**Leona:** We, I did it until we ended the war in Europe.

**Diane:** And you were still ... you were called the code girls, right?

**Leona:** We were the code girls. And it says that the code girls brought a quicker end to the war and they were just, uh, and saved, see, they were sinking our military ships our uh, made in South Portland, our liberty ships. And that was the whole thing. Then the German submarines were in the Atlantic and there was, I don't know how many, I don't know, hundreds of liberty ships and in, across the pond between here and London, because that nobody flew then to work. You know, you didn't fly to war, you went by ship. Hundreds of young man. I met a man at a meeting at a legion meeting who said he went over to Europe on the Queen Mary.

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**Leona:** See what happened. So the, uh, Germans would get, set up a whole, do a new code and then the code girls and others would decipher it and it wouldn't be any good to the Germans. And then we can open up the lane, the sea lanes and let the convoys through and the single ships and then they would get it, they would set up another one and that was what apparently what we were doing. They would set one up and we would decipher it and make it no good to them. And uh, then so the same thing just happened apparently over and over again and then the war did end

**Leona:** and I had an opportunity to come home, uh, be discharged or I had a, a, I don't know where this came from, but an opportunity to be stationed in Pearl Harbor and do Japanese code because they went through the ... it wasn't the same of course, because the Japanese didn't have an Enigma and et cetera. I don't remember too much about the Japanese code. I didn't do it that long anyway. I do remember sitting down on a bench kind of thing at a

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table with strips of paper that I assume had something code on it that we were looking for something.

**Diane:** Did the work that all of you code girls do there at Pearl Harbor lead to anything that you know of?

**Leona:** We don't know if anything led to anything anywhere. We never knew anything. But the reason I took it was I thought it could bring a young man with a family home as an early out at the end of the war and he could end his war earlier than that. And of course, who's going to resist Hawaii?

**Diane:** Well, so at the end of the war, at the end of World War II, did you realize then that you had played this role or was it still a secret to you what you did?

**Leona:** It was a secret until about 15 years ago.

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**Diane:** So you went all those years without realizing what your contribution really was?

**Leona:** Right. And we went all those years without any recognition for what we did. And people in World War Two didn't go home with bells and whistles and all kinds of praise. We didn't talk about our duty. Even the men didn't talk. They, I just got off the train like I'd been to Boston, you know, one night. And uh, that was it for me. Just like a train trip.

**Leona:** I had long since I put it away, I had just, it, it happened in my life and I'm very proud. But, uh, that's it.

**Diane:** So when you came back after the war was over and after you were stationed in Pearl Harbor, what did you do here in Cornish, Maine?

**Leona:** I came home and, uh, was working in a little coat factory over the street here, the building has been torn

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down and a young man got, uh, we were upstairs on the second floor, leaning out the window during lunch hour. And a young man stopped the truck across the street and went into a place to next door, I guess to get some lunch. And, uh, we started talking with him out the window. And, uh, he wanted, I can't remember what really, but I do remember one. I didn't, didn't care.

**Leona:** So I said, well, you've got to bring another guy and to go with my cousin and you've got to have a Cadillac. And I gave him about five different set rules that he had said to fill before he, I would go out with him, but by golly, he did. He did all of them, including the Cadillac.

**Diane:** Leona and the young man, Bob Chasse, from Lewiston, Maine, ended up getting married. He'd been in the Air Force during the war and eventually decided to reenlist, a decision that took them around the world.

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They lived in Tucson, Arizona and visited Mexico and Guatemala. Because Bob was fluent in French he was given an assignment in Paris, France. Leona was very pregnant at the time and couldn't travel right away. Their son Michael, who's now in his late 60s, was born in a little clinic on the Portsmouth Naval base and then off they went to Paris. While stationed there, they made some wonderful trips to England and Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy. After Paris, they moved to Honduras.

Thanks to her own service in the Navy, Leona was able to take advantage of the GI bill and even though she professed to hating school, she furthered her education — by going to beautician school in Lewiston and then a business course that benefited her years later.

Leona and Bob's marriage broke up and she returned to Cornish with Michael in the 60s. The business course she had taken helped her get a job in the post office, where she worked for 20 years. She was able to buy the little

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house on Main Street where she still lives. She was up for the Postmaster's position, but never made it to the final interview because she was diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer and given only three to six months to live. That was 1984. She was 60 years old. Miracle of miracles, she survived that cancer. But the job would have positioned her nicely for retirement, and instead, she says she now lives below the poverty level.

**Leona:** It would have been, the post master job in a small town like this with taxes the way they are, it's, it's a good job. And I would have been sitting pretty right now, but it didn't happen. That was a very tragic thing that happened to me because I had always paid my bills. I had always taken care of everything. Never, no nothing. Just did a good, you know, good job of being an adult.

**Leona:** So I went on and I had that, I was 10 years recovering from that cancer,

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**Diane:** But they gave you three to six months to live and here you are, 95 years old.

**Leona:** Doctor Pickus happened to find he was, he looked, he just retired by the way. He looked like he was about 15 years old, you know, he isn't a large man anyway and he was jolly happy. He, he was my uh, hospital doctor. That was my first trip with him and I was 10 years recovering and probably would have been more except I got another cancer and another and another.

**Diane:** All connected to the lung cancer or separate?

**Leona:** I had that one 20 uh 10 years. They, I had to learn to walk. I was, oh, he chose the right chemo and called me his, what kind of miracle patient I was. I had 15 years of 15 minutes of fame as a miracle patient from cans, from an inoperable lung and lymph node. And then I go on the next 20 years and had the one down here.

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**Leona:** And breast,

**Diane:** What do you mean the one down here? Was it on your skin?

**Leona:** It was in the lymph node somewhere. I remember getting the biopsy down down somewhere.

**Diane:** And had it come from the lung cancer originally. Did they tell you?

**Leona:** Yes. Yeah. Inoperable. And then I had an, I've always had skin cancer. I've had skin cancer throughout and lots of, I had surgery. And then, with the breast cancer, I had surgery and I had both chemo and radiation. And because I got too much radiation, I developed a heart condition.

**Leona:** And so I have a pacemaker and I'm learning to live with that and we monitor it every three months. I'm

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connected with Mercy Hospital. I have a nice heart doctor. Nice. I liked him. And, uh, I have a podiatrist and you name it, optometrist, you name it.

**Diane:** And you have Tracy. What Dr. Weisberg.

**Diane:** Here you are at 95 and you're battling yet another cancer.

**Leona:** I have cancer, breast cancer again.

**Diane:** What do you think it is about you and your constitution that you have survived all of these cancers?

**Leona:** I have no idea. I have, I keep telling anybody who will listen that somebody somewhere wants me to be 95, and that I should handle it with as much dignity as I possibly can.

**Diane:** Is it hard? Sometimes.

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**Leona:** That's it.

**Diane:**

Is it hard sometimes for you to handle it with such dignity?

**Leona:** Yes. Yes. But it's not hard mentally. I have no fear of, uh, you know, I trust, uh, I just say, okay, if somebody wants me to live. Ooh.

**Diane:** How about you? How do you feel about living to o be,

**Leona:** I want to live. I want to get my grandsons married. I want to have great grandchildren more than anything. I want to live. Oh, I want, maybe, I help. I want to live.

**Diane:** I would guess that you are lonely quite a lot.

**Leona:** Never.

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**Diane:** Well, so I got it wrong. I got it wrong.

**Leona:** Never. I can reach out and touch something in my past.

**Diane:** So you're never lonely here even though you live alone because you have so many wonderful memories that are, that surrounds you, really.

**Leona:** Well, Michael is really here a lot. And he stays over a lot.

**Diane:** What's it like for you day to day? What makes it a good day for you?

**Leona:** You, you're going to have to come more often.

**Leona:** But I miss going out.

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**Diane:** What kind of opportunities do you get besides Michael? Are there people who help you? Are there people who volunteer to take you places?

**Leona:** I have a man coming who has helped me with a volunteer group in Kezar Falls. A wonderful group and you give money sometimes for supplies and they help you do things that need to be done. My bathroom floor needs to be down badly. And he has a kind of said he might be able to do it and to build a rail to get down over those cement. I don't, I can't manipulate the cement steps up front and, uh, I can't wait to get something arranged so that I can take my wheelies. I have my chair on a with wheels on it, you know that little walker that has a seat, eh? Yeah. With that little seat with the basket underneath that you put things in and, and get out and walk and try to make myself stronger. I'm ready to go. I want to, I don't want to be more cripple. I want to get out and get some exercise and, but I don't get out enough and I don't get out socially. I'm surprised I can talk to you at all because of my social life.

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**Diane:** Because you don't have a social life.

**Leona:** I don't. At the doctor's office. That's it. That at the waiting room, that's my social life. But hey, you do what you can. That's what, that's all you can do.

**Diane:** How do you maintain such a wonderful disposition?

**Leona:** I don't have anybody to fight with. I guess maybe I don't, I'm not disagreeable, but I'm a Capricorn.

**Leona:** The Capricorn, always climbing up the hill and then you have a setback and then you get up and start climbing again, and then you have a setback and then you stopped climbing again. That is me. I am never without a setback and I, you just kind of have to plow through and do the best you can. That's the same with being 95 with all the dignity you can muster.

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**Diane:** Any last things you want to say that I should have asked you that I didn't? Anything that is important to you?

**Leona:** Of course, but, no, but you've got enough. That's enough life for anybody.

**Diane:** That's a long life. 95. And if you're gonna live to be a hundred, you've still got a few years to go.

**Leona:** I've got some life to live. I hope.

**Diane:** You've been listening to Conversations About Aging. I'm Diane Atwood and I've been talking with Leona Chasse, who's 95 years old. If you have anything to say about our conversation or any other of my other Conversations About Aging — please let me know. Something resonated with you, constructive criticism, you want to recommend someone to be interviewed, or you'd

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This podcast was made possible by Avita of Stroudwater, a memory care facility, and Stroudwater Lodge, an assisted living community, both in Westbrook, Maine. You'll find out more about them at [northbridgecos.com](http://northbridgecos.com).

Many thanks to Smith Atwood Video Services for editing the podcast. See what else they have to offer at [SmithAtwood.com](http://SmithAtwood.com).

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And a thank you to Tom Meuser for his support. He's Director of the Center for Excellence in Aging and Health at the University of New England.