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Conversations About Aging
Mary Hamblen, 98
September 9, 2019

Diane: Welcome to another episode of *Conversations About Aging*. I am Diane Atwood and I am sitting next to Mary Hamblin who is 98 years old and I am dying to talk to her about where she grew up, which is Westbrook, Maine and that's where my dad's family grew up and we were just talking a few minutes ago and it turns out she knows some of my relatives and I think I know some of hers.

Diane: *Conversations About Aging* is a Catching Health special series. I'm traveling the state of Maine interviewing people 60 and older about their perspectives on aging. Mary Hamblen, who now lives in an assisted living facility in Gorham, was born at Queen's Hospital in Portland in 1921. And that momentous occasion is where we began our conversation.

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Mary: I was born there on April 2nd, 1921 and my mother has told me as I grew up that the night that my dad took her to the hospital, she looked at the stairs going up and a nun was standing at the top of the stairs. She said you can do it dear it will be good for you to climb the stairs. So my mother, big as she was, climbed the stairs and I was born the next day.

Diane: Did you live in Portland at the time or did you live in Westbrook?

Mary: My parents did. They had an apartment on High Street. My father worked for Gannett Publishing and they lived in a small apartment there when they were first married and when I was born and then they moved to South Portland and I started to have bronchitis very badly. And the pediatrician told my parents if they didn't get me away from the ocean, they wouldn't have me. So they started looking inland and found a house, a small house in Westbrook on Forest Street. We moved there when I was two and I've lived in Westbrook, except recent years I've lived in Gorham.

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Diane: You now live at the Inn at Village Square, which is an assisted living facility? You have your own apartment, private bathroom, and you get your meals here? Yes. How long have you been here?

Mary: Just a year. Just one year. I lived what we call up on the hill. I lived at Ridgewood One, uh, the campus up there.

Diane: which is an independent living facility? Yes. You call it a facility? You had your own apartment?

Mary: I had my own apartment, did my own cooking and that sort of thing.

Diane: Up until 21 years ago you were living in your own home in Westbrook?

Mary: Yes.

Diane: And were you living alone at that time?

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Mary: At that time, yes. My mother had passed away and I was living alone and I decided I didn't want to take care of a house. So I saw the ad for the Cressey apartments called Mr. Cressey, saw an apartment and took it on the spot.

Diane: And that is here in Gorham, right? Cressey apartments?

Mary: Yes, the Cressey Apartments, yes.

Diane: How long did you stay at the Cressey apartments before you moved to Ridgewood?

Mary: Five years.

Diane: So when making that decision, you don't want to take care of your house anymore. Is that or was that for you a difficult decision to make?

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Mary: It was, I loved my house. The neighbors were wonderful, but I didn't, I was getting to the age where it was hard for me to keep the house up, get the repairs done. And I thought I'm am I, I have three sons and they were beginning to have to help me. So I decided this isn't for me. I'm going to get an apartment. Have never lived in an apartment except when I was an infant.

Diane: Was it a hard adjustment?

Mary: Yes.

Diane: What was the hardest thing about it?

Mary: I felt I had lost my independence, but I hadn't, I hadn't. I, the apartment was a lovely apartment had lots of sunshine on good days. And I had two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen, a bathroom, storage room, and a little backyard in the summertime. Loved it there. But, uh, then I decided I better get into independent living.

Diane: What's the difference?

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Mary: The difference is that independent living under Avesta housing is subsidized housing and my money was running out and I had to find a place where I could live, be comfortable and still have enough money in my purse just to use.

Diane: Did you ever think you'd live to be 98 because the longer we live, the more money we need to have on hand,.

Mary: Right. No, I never dreamed I'd live to 98. And it's a hard thing to accept.

Diane: Why?

Mary: Because I want to be young again. I want to be able to drive. I want to be able to get out and take a ride by myself or put friends in the car, go to the beach and pick up a lobster roll. Um, when I had to give, I drove until I was 94 and about a year after that my eyes began to fail. And it was a rapid downfall. It really was.

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Diane: How did they begin to fail? Do you have a particular condition?

Mary: Yes. Macular degeneration. A lot of us here have macular degeneration.

Diane: So can you see me?

Mary: I can see you. The left-hand side of your face is in shadow, but the right hand, right side of your face because of the light from the window, I can see your features. But when you and Julie walked in the door, I can see forms, I can see color. Um, I cannot read books anymore, so I read in a Kindle. Thank goodness I can do that.

Diane: Because you can enlarge the type?

Mary: Yes.

Diane: Do you ever listen to books on tape?

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Mary: Yes, but I have books on tape, I have a whole basket full of books on tape, but I don't enjoy them.

Diane: You'd rather read than I have somebody read to you?

Mary: Yes, I would.

Diane: So tell me about when you realized that you couldn't drive anymore. It became your decision to stop driving?

Mary: Yes. Yes. Uh, I was 94. I was coming home from Portland. I was alone. I had a 1998 Jaguar, which Julie teases me about all the time.

Diane: I can't believe it. I can see why she would. Wow.

Mary: And I was coming up William Clark Drive and this young girl cut, I was in the right lane. She cut in front of me and went down Spring Street. I came home, picked up the phone and I said to my son, come and get the car. I'm

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through driving. And he said, what happened Ma? I said, don't think it's just, I feel I'm 94 and a young girl cut in front of me. If we'd had an accident I would have been blamed for it.

Diane: But it must have broken your heart to make that decision.

Mary: It did. Diane. I cried that night to think I had to give up driving but I drove till I was 94.

Diane: That's pretty good. And you weren't a threat?

Mary: No. Everyone told me I was a very good driver.

Diane: So why did you have a Jaguar?

Mary: That's a long story. I had a Buick and it ran beautifully. And the bottom rusted out so you could probably put your foot through the floor and see the road. And my grandson in law, who was a mechanic, called one of my sons and said Mimi can't get an inspection sticker,

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what are we going to do? I don't want to tell her. So my son called me and said, mum, the Buick has died. I said, no, it hasn't, it's in beautiful condition. He said, mum, the bottom is all rusted out and Chris can not give you an inspection sticker. I said I don't want to give up driving yet. He said, we'll find you another car and he and his friends came one evening and he called me and said, come and see what I've got out front. And here was the Jaguar, gold, beige leather interior. I loved it. And people, I made quite a statement when I drove through Gorham.

It was a gold, four-door and the trunk was not called the trunk. It was called the boot. The hood was not called the hood. It was called the bonnet. It was an English car.

Diane: Was it a stick-shift?

Mary: No, it was automatic and it was an eight cylinder and I had to be very careful that I didn't go down on that accelerator too hard.

Diane: Where are you ever tempted?

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Mary: Yes.

Diane: What a fun story. Oh goodness. How old were you when you got it then?

Mary: 92.

Diane: So you got a gold Jaguar when you were 92 years old. God love you. Who has it now?

Mary: A man here in Gorham. He bought it for his wife. He, I was at the hairdressers one day and he came in, I was parked out front and he came in and asked the girl who did my hair. Who owns that Jaguar? She told him and he said, does she want to sell it? She said, no, not yet. And then he said, tell her when she gets ready, I'll buy the car.

Diane: So you knew that and you

Mary: And my son sold that to him.

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Diane: Oh, I love that connection. Let's go back in time a little bit because my dad's family was from Westbrook, so I have deep roots in Westbrook. I would like to know if you have any Westbrook stories, like if you go downtown Westbrook today, it's very different than it used to be.

Mary: Oh, I loved Westbrook. I, as I was growing up, we called it the village. It wasn't called Westbrook. We're going to the village and my mother and I would walk from our home on Forest Street up to the village shop in the five and 10, shop, go into one of the dress shops and maybe stop at one of the drug stores and have an ice cream. And then we'd walk home.

Diane: All those places that you just mentioned took me right back because when I was a little girl and would visit my grandparents, I remember the five and dime store, right on Main Street.

Mary: Yes, there was McLellans and Woolworth's.

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Diane: Yes. And then I remember a dress shop, but the one I remember was across the street from there?

Mary: There was LaFonds' store. It was a department store. It had two floors and they had needlework that you could buy to work on. They had clothes. They had, uh, all kinds of interesting things that a child would love to paw through.

Diane: Did they have a movie theater?

Mary: Yes, the Star.

Diane: And where was that?

Mary: That was at the end of Westbrook. And you could get in there for 10 cents until you were 12 years old. After 12 years old, you had to pay 25 cents.

Diane: So I'm assuming that you liked going.

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Mary: Oh, of course. That was our Saturday, Saturday afternoon entertainment. Going to the Star Theater.

Diane: Anything in particular that you liked to see? What was it like to go to the movies back then?

Mary: It was, it was fun.

Diane: They had matinees and newsreels?

Mary: Yes, and evenings. Of course. When I became a teenager, we went in the evening. A group of some maybe one or two after we did our studying and we might go to the Star Theater to see a movie. I loved Westbrook then. It had three or four drug stores. There was Hoods and Vallee's and Reese's and Morin's. He made his own ice cream and we used to congregate in the evening when we were teenagers. We might congregate up there by the old Westbrook Church or one of the drugstores and listen to the music. What was it, Diane, that they had, you put in money and it played ...

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Diane: A jukebox?

Mary: A jukebox. Yes. Yeah.

Diane: Well. Do you remember any of the music from when you were a teenager?

Mary: Oh, of course. I was one of the big band fans and we played all the big bands, Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, all the bands that were very popular at that time.

Diane: And what about dances?

Mary: Oh, of course. Had to go to dances. We danced at the pier.

Diane: The pier at Old Orchard Beach?

Mary: Yes. Okay. It was before it had the fire. It went way out into the ocean. And uh, by that time I was going with my husband. We became engaged and we went to the

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pier every Saturday night to dance. And they had the big bands out there.

Diane: The bands actually were out there on the pier playing?

Mary: Right. The big bands would come to Old Orchard and play. In fact, when Frank Sinatra was singing for, I believe, Tommy Dorsey at the time, my husband and I would walk up to the stage and I could have reached out and touch Frank Sinatra's shoes.

Diane: I want to know how you met your husband, were you high school students?

Mary: We were in school together.

Diane: So he's a Westbrook boy, too.

Mary: He lived in Westbrook. He was born here in Gorham. He was one of the Hamblens of Gorham. Uh, his father was, and then they moved to Westbrook when he

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and his brother were just babies. His father got a job at SD Warren.

Diane: How long were you married?

Mary: Uh, we were married 28 years. He had kidney cancer and he was sick off and on for three years before he passed away.

Diane: What a horrible thing to happen to you and your family.

Mary: It was, it was, it was very hard. I still had a child in school. Uh, the other two boys, the older boys were married, uh, one of them was in the army. Um, and they, it was a hard time to go through.

Diane: We learn lessons when we go through hard times. Is there anything that you learned from this that you think would be helpful to somebody else?

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Mary: It builds character. I'll tell you that. I learned to pound nails. I learned to clean gutters. I learned to uh, do a lot around the house that my husband did and I took off storm windows, the old fashioned wooden storm windows and put those up in the fall. Oh, I climbed up on roofs and cleaned out gutters and I learned to do a lot. It did not hurt me. It built character.

Diane: But on top of learning to do these things, having to do things, you're still grieving about the loss of your partner, your loved one.

Mary: Oh, yes. But the, the advice I would give to anybody, keep busy. Just keep busy, keep finding projects to do.

Diane: Did you ever work outside the home or were you a housewife, what did you do?

Mary: I had worked in the telephone company before I was married and then after I was some married and had two children, my husband had come home from World

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War II and he worked, he got a job in the telephone company and he came home one day and said they're hiring temps for the summer, would you think like to think of going back to work. So I went in and had an interview. They hired me because I already had two and a half, five years I believe with the telephone company. I was a toll operator, what they called the toll operator.

Diane: Meaning for long distance calls. Yes. Yes. And did you work at one of those boards or was it yes. Wasn't that hard work?

Mary: Yes. And I was just learning to do conference calls, like plug somebody in in Europe with somebody in Portland. When I found I was pregnant with my third child, so I stopped. After that, I went to work when my youngest was 10, I went to work for Pratt Abbott and I loved that job. I loved the girls I worked with and it was we, it was like a club. We had more fun.

Diane: Do you do any kind of work now, what would you call your work that you do now?

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Mary: Work. I don't work. I'm taken care of. I am pampered. They are great here at the Inn. They are just wonderful.

Diane: At what point did you come to realize that you were older now?

Mary: I don't want to be older. My mind says that I'm still young enough to do all the things I used to do. My body says slow down.

Diane: So it doesn't say to stop, it just says to slow down. Is it just your eyes that are a problem?

Mary: No, I have arthritis quite badly. My legs are very weak. I can't walk even around my room without my walker.

Diane: You don't feel old in your head. You still feel like a young person and you've got and you wish you had the body to go with it.

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Mary: Exactly. Yes, I do. I wish I could get out and run around the parking lot. Instead. I almost stumble around the parking lot with my walker.

Diane: So how do you deal with that?

Mary: You just deal with it. I am 98 years old. I have to deal with it, but I'm happy here. My children visit often.

Diane: So there's really nothing that you have to worry about.

Mary: No.

Diane: But do you ever worry about anything?

Mary: I worry about my children.

Diane: Don't all parents do that?

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Mary: Yes, I worry about them. I don't think you ever stop worrying about them. My oldest son now is 76 years old and he rides a Harley Davidson and it scares the life out of me when I know he's going on a trip. He does charity rides for, he belongs to the United Bikers and they do charity rides for wounded vets. And it scares me when I know he's going on one of these rides.

Diane: So you worry about him, you worry about your kids who are now in their seventies.

Mary: Yes. And my boys are very patient with me and I think sometimes they want to say Ma knock it off.

Diane: Now that you're 98, do you think that people treat you any differently than say when you were even 90?

Mary: Not here,

Diane: But in other places they did as you got older?

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Mary: They think oh this poor little old lady, we've got to find her chair to sit in. But, um, I don't like the feeling of being dependent somebody, but I have to be because my legs are so weak that I have to depend on my sons to keep me upright. But on the whole I'm very comfortable.

Diane: Do you ever have times when you feel lonely?

Mary: Yes. Occasionally.

Diane: What are the usual circumstances?

Mary: I call it a pity me day. When I feel that I'm a burden to my children, that they have to keep in touch with me or when they don't call periodically, I feel lonely. And that is just selfish.

Diane: But at least you recognize you can put a name to what you're feeling.

Mary: Yes, yes.

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Diane: You don't just shove it down.

Mary: No.

Diane: You know, some people have that habit of denying what they're feeling and just makes ...

Mary: I don't deny it. I just call it a pity me day.

Diane: And then do you call them all?

Mary: No, I do not. I wait for them to call me.

Diane: That's funny. Do you think about reaching 100?

Mary: I don't like to think about reaching 100. My youngest son keeps telling me, mum, you're gonna be, you're gonna reach 100 and we're going to get you a cane.

Diane: Oh, one of those special canes for people who get to be ...

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Mary: I said, don't you dare.

Diane: Are you still learning new things?

Mary: Yes, I try. I try. I read books in my kindle and I've learned things from that. Um, my son downloads wonderful books for me. Travel books, um, adventure books, um, romance. I love regency books that talk about Dukes and Duchesses. That's light reading and I like it very much.

Diane: That's good. So books are really important to you?

Mary: Very. I've always read ever since I, when the Spot ran away.

Diane: Did you use to use the computer or do you use the computer?

Mary: No, I learned to use a computer, but I don't have one. We had one at Ridgewood. We had two at Ridgewood and I took computer lessons. Um, loved it, uh,

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played with it all the time. Uh, but I wouldn't be able to see the computer anyway.

Diane: I'm going to finish up here in a minute. It's getting really hot in here since we turned off all the air conditioning. We've got the sun streaming in. I just want to know ...

Diane: If you could summarize how you've lived your life these 98 years, how you want to continue living your life, how would that be?

Mary: I wouldn't change it. I had a good life. I've been through ups and downs as I call it, valleys and mountains. But that's life and you go with it and you take it as it is.

Diane: You've been listening to Conversations About Aging, a Catching Health special series. I'm Diane Atwood and I've been talking with Mary Hamblen, who's 98 years old and lives in Gorham, Maine. If you have anything to say about our conversation or any of my other

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You'll find pictures of Mary, a written transcript of our interview, and other conversations about aging at CatchingHealth.com.

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