

## **Conversations About Aging**

**Joanne Santee, 78**

**October 21, 2019**

**Diane:** On a clear, sunny day in early September, my sister Cathy and I took a ferry out of Rockland, Maine and headed for the island of North Haven. About an hour's ride. It was just after Labor Day, so many of the summer people and tourists had left, leaving behind about 355 year-round residents. That number is according to the last census, done in 2010.

Our destination was Southern Harbor House, an extended care facility that opened earlier in the year. The first and only of its kind on the island. Lindsey Beverage, the administrator, left a car for us at the island ferry terminal. With the keys in it. The house was easy to find. It's a small island, after all. We were not prepared for what we saw when we arrived. A beautiful historic home surrounded by views of the harbor. It had once belonged to Mary White, who donated it so that other islanders would have a safe place to live if they needed some extra help as they aged or could no longer live on their own. The alternative for too many older people in those situations had been to move to a facility on the mainland. A shock, in so many ways, for lots of people who had lived their entire lives on the island and had hoped to stay there until the end. Southern Harbor House is now making that possible.

I'm Diane Atwood and you're listening to Conversations About Aging. I'm traveling the state of Maine interviewing people 60 and older about their perspectives on aging. In this episode, I talk with a woman who has returned home to North Haven to live out the rest of her life. She has a chronic lung condition and relies on oxygen from a machine for her every breath. When she heard about Southern Harbour House, she knew it would be perfect for her when the time came. That time is now. But don't think that serious health issues stand in the way of her continuing to enjoy life — on her beloved island. Not for one minute. She's had quite a life. And it's not over yet.

**Joanne:** I am Cecilia, Joanne Santee, better known as CJ or Joanne or Cece. I've moved 74 times in my life. I started off here on the island and now I'm back here on the island. I've moved all over the United States and met a lot of wonderful people. And every place I go, my name is different. That's the reason why I say Cecilia, Joanne, Santee or CJ.

**Diane:** What do you want us to call you?

**Joanne:** Joanne. My dad was a job hopper. We left here when I was about seven. And then my husband was an engineer. We have five children. And so between the two we were always on the move somewhere. And when I married my husband, to me, that was normal to move like that. So I didn't think much about it. But in the seventies, my poor children didn't know where they were from. And so we bought my great aunt's house here on the island. So they could at least have one little spot that was regular. And I'd come up in the summers with the children, with my children and several others. I'd usually come with seven or eight kids with me and spend the summer. And then in the 80s, late 80s, my husband was at Three Mile Island in charge of the money end of the clean up there. And it was such a political job. When I went home in the summer, at the end of the summer with my children to start school, I just got back and he told me he quit. I said, what? We took our retirement money and we came up here and built a grocery store on the island. He didn't even carve the thanksgiving turkey. I was just a homemaker with five children. We knew zip.

Thank goodness, he was my best friend besides being my husband because I could write a whole story on that. We had it for 13 years. We couldn't get rid of it. But Bechtel, the company he worked for wanted him back and through that whole year they kept on him about coming back, when we were building this thing. And before you know it he had hired back on and they transferred him to Houston. We tried hiring managers to come and manage the store because we couldn't get rid of because it wasn't making any money and they almost bankrupted us twice. And finally, they transferred him back to Maryland so I could sort of go back and forth a little bit. And all this time we're coming to Maine, you know, and they ended up making him a vice president. He was head of the east coast. And we thought maybe we could sell it and maybe make five cents and get rid of it. And he had a brain aneurysm and he didn't make it. He was in a coma for three months.

**Diane:** Tell me about that. How old was he at the time?

**Joanne:** 54 four years old, never sick a day in his life. I was running the store and he was down in Maryland and I was going back and forth as I could. He was in Gaithersburg, Maryland and I'd get back there as I could. Like we were almost the end of the summer, it was Labor Day, Labor Day weekend and we were going to meet in Scranton at my oldest daughter's because she was having her first baby. So, I'm at the store can't wait to get out. He went with my middle daughter. They went to his mother's in Ohio for the weekend, for Labor Day and they were over there and the phone rang at the store. They said he, I didn't even know what a brain aneurysm was, he had a brain aneurysm. And I had to get there to sign papers and stuff and trying to get to southern Ohio from here. I was on every mode of transportation except a horse, I think, trying to

get there, oh my god. I mean I didn't get there till like 11 o'clock that night. And he's in Ohio. And he opened his eyes, he saw me, and he went (kiss). That was the last thing and he went into a coma and I never, till he died on New Year's. They did seven different procedures to his brain. He was in every kind of, he'd get these infections they couldn't get rid of. But they helicoptered him from, after a week at in Ohio they helicopter him from there to Washington Hospital Center in Washington, DC. That was 35 minutes from the house, from our house. So every day I drove that beltway around Washington, DC every single day for those three months back and forth around that beltway, and you know who Howard Stern is? Well, I tried to listen to something on the radio and everything I listened to it made me cry. So here I am driving around this thing every day and I turned stations and I hear this guy saying this god, really god-awful stuff. What did he say? And I'd turn it back on. I'd want to just jump through the phone and strangle him. And I found, wait a minute, for a second, it took my mind off, so I listened to him every day.

**Diane:** During that time, did you have the hope that he would come out of the coma? And he would be fine? Yes. Because they told you that might happen?

**Joanne:** Yes, this is all part of it. I was his advocate. And if you're ready to talk about that, I would talk about that.

**Diane:** Why don't we talk about that, because that, to me, it seems like that was the most powerful event of your entire existence.

**Joanne:** Of my entire life, that was, absolutely. When they flew him there and I got there, I realized over those three months how thankful I was that we were in Washington, DC. If we had been two blocks out of Washington, DC, into Maryland, I never ever could have signed the papers I had to sign to let him go. Never could have done it. You could do it in Washington, DC, not in Maryland. And they would have put him into a nursing home in that condition forever. I found out all of these things as I'm going through it because we hadn't ever signed anything. And they kept saying, they gave him a trach in Ohio, gave him a trach. I said at the time, what happens with that trach? Can you take that trach out? And they say oh, yeah, soon as he comes to, well he never came to. So you can't take it out. So I want it tattooed right here do not enter.

**Diane:** On your own neck.

**Joanne:** On my own neck. So we went through all those months that they would, this doctor would come in that doctor would come in they would be let's try this, let's try that. Seven different procedures to his brain.

**Diane:** Had you and your husband ever talked about the what-ifs?

**Joanne:** Absolutely. We talked about stuff. I mean, he was always funny, though. He wanted to be cremated and flushed. I mean, stuff like that, he was that kind of a guy.

**Diane:** So he would tell you what he wanted. But then he would try to gloss over it with you.

**Joanne:** Yeah, but we never you know, there was never anything ever written, ever written. So after he'd seen so many doctors, they moved him to a rehab and moved him back and he was in a private room. And it was just awful. I wanted to get the doctors together to talk to them. You never do what I did. I got all 17 of those people with the nurses to sit around a table. It took me a while to do it, but I did it. I got them all there. And I had a picture of him and myself at the top of a mountain down in St. John the Caribbean that was taken a few months before. And I pass it around. I said I want you to all look at that picture. Just so you know that is Larry Santee, not the person that's in there. And I just want somebody one of you to please tell me that there's some chance that some person like that is going to be back to me. Every one of them looked down. One neurologist looked me straight in the eye and he said, Ms Santee, what you see is as good as it's going to get, and it's going to get worse. And that was what pushed me over the edge to say, and I'm Catholic. And I had the priest even say years ago, the ethical issues were easy. But he said now, with the modern medicine they can keep you going no matter what. Those ethical issues are getting harder and harder and harder.

**Diane:** And that's what was happening with your husband, Larry, that he was being kept alive by a machine?

**Joanne:** Yes, yes. That's the only way he was, he was in a coma and being kept alive with the machine. So I told my five children, I got them together. And I said look, I told you in the beginning with this when they put that trach in that anything, any final decision is going to be mine, you'd have no voice in it. Because you would get, none of you are going to agree and you'll be fighting forever, your whole life over it. I said you'll get mad at me, but you'll get over it. So I made that final decision to let him go.

**Diane:** By letting him go you mean you pull the plug on the ventilator is that they just shut it off? Is that how it works?

**Joanne:** Yes. And it was 10 days before you know before he passed.

**Diane:** So it got shut off. And it took 10 days for him to pass away? And was your family? Were all the kids there with him and you?

**Joanne:** Not all of them could. They were there as much as they could, but everybody lived — two of my kids were up in Maine, one's in Pennsylvania. It was hard.

**Diane:** So how did they react to what your decision was?

**Joanne:** As I'd hoped they would. Totally supp ... even though they were sad about it. A couple of them didn't want to do it, but totally supported me in my decision. And I couldn't be any more grateful than that.

**Diane:** You make me want to cry. Actually, I feel like I want to just, it

**Joanne:** It was awful.

**Diane:** You have no idea how long it's going to

**Joanne:** You have no idea how long it's going to be. And when he passed, he looked up, opened his eyes and smiled. I swear there is something up there. Anyway, that's when I made up my mind that I had to see a lawyer and get something written right away because I never wanted to put my kids through that with me, ever.

**Diane:** So that was 23 years ago. And here you are now back on North Haven.

**Joanne:** I'm starting my life here and ending my life here. In a way, that's how I look at it. I started my life here and I'll end my life here.

**Diane:** You said that you lived here on the island? Yes. Until you were seven? Yes. Why did your family move off the island?

**Joanne:** Very good question. It started this crazy life. I mean it. We we lived in a hotel in Virginia. My dad worked on the railroad for a while. We went to outside of Richmond, Virginia and lived like tenant farmers with my dad's brother who was a lawyer. But my dad was a tenant farmer. He always considered himself the black sheep of the family and he wasn't but he considered himself that.

**Diane:** And that can cloud ...

**Joanne:** It clouded a lot in our lives. So anyway, and then, when he went from there, to we went up to Pennsylvania. And I don't know what he was doing first there, but then he got a job in a power plant. We moved there. So we were always moving, always having to move.

**Diane:** And so at what point did you leave the family and become an independent young woman?

**Joanne:** Well, when I was nine ...

**Diane:** You left the family when you were nine?

**Joanne:** No, when I was nine, I decided it was going to be different for me. So I started with a little wagon, dragging it and I'd go pick up get newspapers and bottles and take them to the recycling center. I put the money in a bank account because nobody could pay for my college and I decided I was going to college. So I started saving my money. And my dad was so strict. I couldn't go anywhere, so I might as well babysit or whatever. So I'd babysit and put all that money in. And so I was able to put myself they didn't have, in those days, there was no student loan until my second year in college was when the first student loans came out. And so you paid for your schooling. And so I paid for my first year and then I came up here and worked in the summer, so I could try to pay for help pay for the second year. And then I got a little bit of a student loan because that was the first time they'd offered it. And then I worked at that. And that's was it was it, went to college, I was going to be a vet.

**Diane:** And you didn't become a vet?

**Joanne:** I did not. I became a mother. I became a mother with five kids instead of that. I did teach school for a while. Taught third and fourth grade. But the second year, well, I met my husband, we ended up running off and getting married and spent 34 years with my best friend. And he and I even though we were from totally different backgrounds in some ways, we were also kind of similar a little bit. And he went to work during the day and went to night school. And we he was 34 graduated. And he did real well. But it took him a while to settle down, to kind of mature a little bit. So I don't think kids have to go to school right out of high school.

**Diane:** You said that you came back here and worked in the summertime. So even though your family left the island when you're about seven ...

**Joanne:** We always came back. One thing I can say about my family even though my dad had a lot of problems. My mother had been from here and they would daddy would save the money up so that every other year, we would come one year to Maine to see these grandparents and the other year to Tennessee, to his parents. So we always had the family connections that never went away. And so that's one really good thing that they instilled in all of us was this family connection. There's six of us, we're scattered all over, but we still talk to each other all the time.

**Diane:** And this is where your roots are.

Joanne: Yes. I had a family before I left here, six years ago, I had a family reunion here on the island had 54 people show up. We had a blast, we did. I'd set it up for the week that we had a bus ride with a tour around the island, had a big lobster bake. We had a variety show they all had to perform in the variety show. I set all this stuff up before they came. And we had lobster boats I had two lobster boats to take them all out lobstering and it was so cool, got the Grange Hall, a couple of people to make big lasagnas and we had just a big dinner over there. And it was just so fun. It was so so much fun.

**Diane:** And some of the family hadn't been here maybe for years and years?

**Joanne:** Years and years and years and their children had never been here. And coming from a long way away across the United States, you know, all the way from the state of Washington and California. And it was really nice that they all came.

**Diane:** So you're quite the party planner too.

**Joanne:** Well. I worked as an activity director in Florida, a whole different story.

**Joanne:** After my husband died, I didn't know what to do. I had a house in Maryland, bills over my head. And so I came back up and put more money into the store which I never should have done. And I didn't realize I was in a depression. I didn't even realize what it was. But I was not coming out of my house and wasn't talking to anybody. That's not like me. And so I was I watched a movie, the end of it called *Over the Hill* with Olympia Dukakis. And I thought I want to see that whole movie. It was about this older lady, her husband had died and it took place in Maine. And they moved her in with her kids and you find out her daughter is in Australia and you find out that she and her daughter had problems. But it's on her birthday and her son that she's living with brings her a birthday cake in her apartment. She took it outside, threw it out in the yard and went and got on the plane and flew to Australia. And she got there and her daughter was not thrilled. So she ended up buying a 64 Chevy. And she went on an adventure

and it was about her adventure through Australia. I loved that movie. I watched it over and over again, called *Over the Hill*.

**Diane:** So that inspired you to do what?

**Joanne:** Yes. So that inspired me to do something really different. And I didn't tell the kids I was doing it. And part of the story, when my husband was dying in the hospital, I met this lady. And she and I got to be kind of friends at the hospital because we were both there for three months, every day all day and come to find out, and our husbands end up dying within an hour of each other on New Year's. We both end up having four girls and a boy, both of us, our anniversaries were even same day, same year. But she was a lawyer and he was a doctor and she had a condo down in Naples, Florida. And I had been down to see her after our husbands died. And she wanted me to come down and spend the winter with her. But a week or two was okay but company can be like fish, you know, after three days. So I was like no, I don't think that's a good idea. But I decided I'm going to go down there and see if I can find somewhere to buy a little trailer or something, to just be down there for the winter. So I went down and started looking around, didn't even tell the kids what I was going to do. I said I was going down to Florida for a week. I started looking around and I found this trailer. I'd never lived in a trailer in my life, it was a, oh, what do they call them? They go over the car, you put them up over the truck, the kind that goes up over a truck. I didn't and then I tried to find a place to put it. So I found this KOA campground. And I went looked and I thought that'll be ok. I'll put it in here and got down to price. And so I had them pull it there in October, they were supposed to bring it over. And I was going to go down. So, when I, thought I'd look for a job there and I knew I just had the store. So I went into the office and said to the lady at the office. I said when I get down here, if you ever need anybody to work in the little store I might be able to help out. So when I got back to Maine, I got back here and the phone rang and it was this lady and she's like, how would you, I was looking at your resume, how would you like to be an activity director? Well, I'd done a lot of crazy things, I directed plays and Wizard of Oz and done a lot of crazy stupid things and I have five kids and I taught school third and fourth grade. So, what do you do as an activity director? She said, oh, you shop a little and plan a few things. You shop 'til you drop and plan till you flop. That's what you do as an activity director. But they pulled me out of my depression. I went down and did that job. I couldn't even believe I got paid for it. I wanted to pay them. I loved my job. And they'd go along with anything I was planning. I mean, from having 80-year-old ladies doing cheers and cheerleading and all this crazy stuff.

**Diane:** How did your kids react when they realized what you were doing?



**Joanne:** When they came down they were thrilled when they saw how happy I was. They were all thrilled.

**Diane:** Because they probably were so worried about how you were going to be able to keep going.

**Joanne:** Right, they were. But you know, a man from right here on the island, in fact he was here yesterday for coffee. His name is George Silverman, and when I was trying to figure out what to do with that store and I knew things just weren't right to and trying to decide if I was going to sell it, not sell it and I worried about the people in the winter here. What are they going to do without a store? So I was trying to decide it. He knew that, he went home, he lived in Portland, he'd gone home, but in October he came back to the island. And he came in the store and I was cleaning shelves and he saw me and he said, Joanne, what are you going to do? And I said, oh, George, I don't know. I said I love this place, and he gave me a statement that I have never forgotten that I pass on to people. He said to me, somebody told me years ago, I'll pass it on to you. Don't ever love something that can't love you back. That is a really profound statement. And that is what absolutely clicked for me. So I ended up selling the place a hundred thousand under the appraised value, I didn't get crap out of it. But I sold it to one of my employees and left.

**Diane:** And so, in this campground that you were staying at it was for older people?

**Joanne:** It was a campground that half of it, because of the wintertime, half a it where people who were seasonal. Their families would bring them down and drop them off for the winter and then leave them and go home. And then I was in charge of taking care of them. The other half of the campground where people coming in and out with their big trailers. And I was supposed to keep peace between those two factions. And it was fun. I had a great time doing it. And then they were changing everything and they wanted me to be a fundraiser. I was like, gag me. And I had a few problems, so at that time with family. So I quit it and came back up here.

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

**Joanne:** Two and a half years.

**Diane:** And you decided to come back here or did you decide to ...

**Joanne:** No what I ended up doing then. I had my very best friend in the whole world, and she and I, after that we did this adventure. I'll tell you about the adventure. I came

back. I came back up to the island and I called my friend, she lives in West Virginia. And I said I just found a 1987 Ford Econoline camper van and it had 87,000 miles on it was \$3,000. I say Elaine I'm buying it. And we're going to go on an adventure. Because our husbands, we always the four of us always traveled together, and both of our husbands have died. And we always wanted to go, I wanted to see Mount Rushmore and I always wanted to be at Yellowstone. And my friend Elaine likes really nice fancy things she really does. She likes fancy, fancy things. This was as far from fancy as you could get. I put this sign on the back that said ladies and the tramps on a great adventure. We were stopped by the ATF, we were, we break down we took all back roads. And we went from August until October and went all the way up to if we saw a place we liked it we'd stop and then down through Yellowstone, back across the United States. I ended up selling that thing for almost what I paid for it. But we had such a phenomenal adventure and then she has a condo down in down in Florida in Homosassa, Florida. That's where I came from. And she needed somebody to help her get that place redone. So I went and worked on the kitchen and stuff because I love refinishing houses. So I did that after that.

**Diane:** You had your adventure. You took turns driving this big thing?

**Joanne:** I did the entire driving.

**Diane:** And she was just the queen in the back?

**Joanne:** She sat on the side. And if I could tell you, that is a true, true story. I mean a true story. She's such a good friend and good sport. This thing, have you ever seen one of those that has the bed up over the top and then you have the couch in the back makes into a bed. So one of us was going to take, because we're friends but we're not that kind of friends, you know, so anyway out one of us was going to sleep up here and the other was going to sleep on the couch in the back and we both had Shih Tzus, little Shih Tzu dogs. That's where the ladies and the tramps came from. So the first night after I got down there and picked her up in West Virginia and we started across. We're still in Pennsylvania we get all the way across Pennsylvania to our first campground. First stop. Neither one of us could get in that bed up here. Neither one of us could bend to get in.

**Diane:** You hadn't tried it out first to see if you could make it

**Joanne:** No. So she's in West Virginia and I'm here I mean ...

**Diane:** So what, the dogs slept up there?

**Joanne:** No, what I did, I went and bought I got we got a we had a cooler, I put a cooler between the seats in the front, and then got one of those mattresses like you put on a chaise lounge and put that between us. What we must have looked like in these campgrounds. We stayed mostly in KAOs. And like towels in the windows of this thing. So it was blocked in up front. And that's where I slept the entire time. And she slept in the back.

**Diane:** That is such a funny story.

**Joanne:** She took all the pictures. And I have it on a video. I mean, I've got it on a video. So it's a great fun adventure. And when we got there, there's so many, so much was so great. So much of it's great. I mean, I can't even describe it, In fact, she's done a lot more traveling because she's got a lot more money than I have. But she still says and I know she's not lying, that it's been the best trip of her entire life, except for when she went to, she puts it right up with when she went to Greece. But that this trip was just you know, because it was so different for her. So totally different, and she did all the filming. And it was right after I got on this oxygen and I wasn't supposed to go up these mountains. But I did, and I drove up those mountains with that thing. And it was so good. I couldn't do it now. Couldn't do it now. And then the apartment got to be, I went and stayed with her in her two-bedroom apartment. She had a two-bedroom down there. So I stayed with her. But the steps got to be, this was getting much worse. So I said I've got to find my own place.

**Diane:** But I'm thinking how that that wasn't that long ago.

**Joanne:** So five years ago.

**Diane:** All right, so your adventure was about five or six years ago. And by then you're on oxygen, you're on oxygen full time the noise that we hear in the background?

**Joanne:** Yeah, yeah, I diagnosed with this COPD about 25 years ago before my husband died. And but I fought it and fought it the oxygen and it just finally got to the point I had to go on it because it's one of those diseases.

**Diane:** But before, in the beginning, did you have to be on oxygen intermittently or you just fought it all together?

**Joanne:** I fought it all together. And then right before we went on this adventure cross-country, I finally said, Okay, all right. Okay.

**Diane:** Well, it must have been so hard for you to breathe in certain circumstances that must have been frightening.

**Joanne:** I wasn't using it all the time. I was just using it in certain times, when I had to but it wasn't as much as it is now. Now I have to just totally be on it. But also, it got to be hard to me to go up and down stairs. So then I bought the house in Florida. And I bought it in a 55 and up community down there. And I loved it. I loved it down there. They were they had a great little clubhouse and a lot of friends there. But in June of this year, I'd been talking to Lindsey about maybe next year because I was having to have more and more help at my house. But my kids came down, wanted me to get out of there for hurricane season this year. So my oldest daughter wanted me to go stay with her. And finally I said, okay, because in case the power went out, they worry about me down there. So it was like, okay, all right I'll come stay with you. So she was going to come down, she came down to ride up with me and then was going to bring me up here to the island for a week or two. And she went down there and went to see my doctors and they said a couple more things that I wish they hadn't said. And so the next thing I know, when we left, we stopped my son's in in Oakridge, Tennessee and they had this phone call with all children about me and they told me, Mom, we want you to go in the assisted living up here on the island. Well, if I have to go somewhere, I mean, this is be the place to go. But I had no intentions when I left Florida. This was not what I was doing. So I hadn't even said goodbye to anybody. So this has been quite the, but now, you know, now that I'm here, I mean, this place is fabulous. I mean, you know, I tell people, how do you like it up there? I'd say, oh, it's fabulous. Do I want to be there? Hell no. Sorry. But if I've got to be somewhere, this is a wonderful place to be.

**Diane:** What was it like for you, though, to have your kids, they'd tried to do an intervention on you before? Yes. So they're not like sit back and let things roll, are they?

**Joanne:** They aren't? They aren't.

**Diane:** But what was it like for you to suddenly have the kids kind of in a gentle, loving way gang up on you?

**Joanne:** I went back to thinking about my grandfather, and you're on the island and how at the very end, they were trying to help him by moving him around with them, with my mother and her sister and uncle, and how they ended up almost like resenting the person they were going to help. And I did not want that for my kids. I didn't want to be a burden for them. Because I don't know if I'm going to die next year or when I'm 95. I have no idea how long it's going to be and I know how strong willed I am. I am pretty

strong willed. I know that. And I, my brain, I can't stop it. I wish I could. My husband would say to me, doesn't your brain ever go on a neutral? No, no. Because I've always got an idea. I've always got an idea. And the kids think I'm trying to rule them and I'm not at all. I don't mean it that way I just see something, I'll say hey, have you ever thought about doing it instead of ...

**Diane:** But the tables were turned this time because what they were suggesting is in a way, overruling what you might want to have done with your life next. There must be some part of you that knew I have got to do something because I haven't ...

**Joanne:** I knew. That's why I talked to Lindsey last year because I could see that like, making my bed was taking me an hour and a half to two hours. I could tell that getting my groceries I had somebody go with me because it was getting to be hard for me to carry them in. It was things to do like that and then being forgetful. That worried me a little bit because I didn't want to do something that was going to be dangerous, you know? And so all of those things I knew were little issues. That yes, I could have moved in with my kids, but they all work. I mean, why would I do that to them? Then they'd have to hire somebody to come in to watch me during the ...

**Diane:** Because you still needed help. Yeah. Even if you were there. What made you get in touch with Lindsey in the first place? What was it about this place that you're living in now? Harbor House?

**Joanne:** Before I went to Florida, they were just in the midst of talking about this. And Mary White had just donated this and they were talking about it and they had a meeting in town. I went and I just put up my hand and I said well, when I get ready, sign me up now. Sign me up then because it sounds like a great place to me. Because I kinda knew I didn't want to be a burden with them. I mean, I think I've always kind of known that. Aging. We all do it. I'm reading this book *At Peace*. I have to put it down and pick it up, because it is the most depressing book. Oh, God.

**Diane:** Is it about making peace with ...

**Joanne:** Palliative care, it's what I've just found out. I don't even know what that was, you know what it is probably, palliative. I'm very much into that.

**Diane:** What made you understand that the way you're living your life now is considered palliative care?

**Joanne:** I didn't until I read that book. I didn't know what it was called. I never knew what it was called. I just knew that certain things with your body happen when you get old. And if you fix one thing, something else going to go wrong. I knew that just from being a kid growing up and watching the elderly and working with the people I worked with down at KOA and all that, but to see people when they kind of lose their memories a little bit and everything and I ...

**Diane:** But for you ...

**Joanne:** I believe in God. I've tried to lead a good life. I've tried to follow the commandments. Not that I haven't made mistakes. I've tried to be nice to everybody. And so I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid of dying. Do I want to die? No. But it doesn't scare me like it does a lot of people. As I know that there's something else. And I just know what's in my heart.

**Diane:** So you're 78 you're still in your 70s. It's the COPD that has kind of determined the trajectory of your life these last several years.

**Joanne:** Yeah, right. COPD is really ruling me. And I can tell when I went back from last year because I was up here for two months last year. And when I moved back, I could tell that there was a difference, I mean, in the breathing. I could just, I could just tell. And it might stay like this now for a couple of three years. And that will be fine? It's fine with me, because I'm still doing. See, before I'd left here after I sold the store and did that all that down there, I started a little tour business here on the island. I call it Joanne's Tiny tours. And it was more fun than you could imagine.

**Diane:** How many times have you said that now I had the best time it was the most fun. You really got enjoyment out of things.

**Joanne:** Yeah, I do get enjoyment out of thing, when you do something that you really, it's funny. It's funny how, I don't know, the way I approach things, I guess is a little different. But everybody says, don't you get tired of riding around the island? Nope?

**Diane:** Are you still trying to do it? I can still do it. How do you do it?

**Joanne:** Well, word of mouth now. I mean, it's like, and I don't even care if I get paid. I just like doing it. I'll just run into people and they're trying to, they've never been here before, walking or whatever. You would be surprised how many people I've run into that just well, you want to see the island? We'd love to see the island, want to know about it. I do historical tours about the history and sometimes when I was doing it really to make

money, sometimes I would take people clamming and dig clams with them or take the children down to go under the, you know, under to show them what's under the seaweed and all that.

**Diane:** And what about you? What are your favorite things on the island?

**Joanne:** Well, when I was in labor, I went in my head, I would always go up to big beach at Mullens Head at our park. And that's where I've stayed in labor. Like I said it's 28 miles of road here and as many times as I've driven around it, I never ever get tired of it. And I've traveled, not everywhere, but I've done a fair amount of travel and I've been to Italy and Spain and Canada and out to Hawaii and a Caribbean cruise and different things. And this is still one of the most beautiful, East Tennessee. Two of the most beautiful places I've ever been are still East Tennessee and here. It's beautiful.

**Diane:** When you take people on tours now you still drive your car?

**Joanne:** Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

**Diane:** So just because you're hooked up to oxygen doesn't mean that you are suddenly not able to get around.

**Joanne:** No, no, no. I've got my portable oxygen. It plugs in the car. And so I plug it in the car and off I go. And I do fine. You know, I can't get out and walk down the beach like I used to very well because of walking up and down those hills. Too much for you? Yeah, a little too much. But I am going to try it. I'm going to try to go down to Big Beach this week if I take somebody with me. I've got to have somebody with me to go but I'm going to try to do it.

**Diane:** Now, you're older, now that you're 78? Yeah. Do people treat you any differently as an older person? Do you ever notice?

**Joanne:** They do. And in some, I'm trying my hardest not let them. And it made me feel so good when I was down at the Waterman Center about a month ago. And this young man because I've always loved kids, I love kids, I love to talk to them. And this young man who's about 11, he meets with all of his friends down there. And he saw me in there and most time the kids will just go walking right out the door. He saw me and he walked over to say hello. And when he did, all of his friends came and they stood there and talked me for at least 20 minutes. It was so cool. That that's what I think is a heart. That's what I would like to see happen in here is somehow that we're involved with the school. Because to me, the biggest thing with the seniors is that, as you get older, you

need to have that camaraderie between the older people and the children. In most cultures, except here, the older people are revered. And you live in the homes with the children and the grandchildren, almost every culture except ours. But we started and this is my own thought on this. Back when my kids were when we started this moving around and putting kids in daycares. We started a whole generation of teaching kids, you put people somewhere, that's what you do. You take your children, you put them somewhere. So now that's a learned thing after 30,40 years. So now when those children get older, then you put people somewhere. So you put your parents somewhere, they're not being mean,

**Diane:** it's just what they know.

**Joanne:** That's what they know.

**Diane:** But more and more older people ...

**Joanne:**

And you're getting, it's getting more and more. And so the older people don't get to know the young people. And the young people like so many children are afraid of this.

**Diane:** The 11-year-old who came up and said hello to you, you were wearing your oxygen. And did any of the kids ask you what's that?

**Joanne:** I immediately told them what that was, I mean, if I can see a little one that looks at this, I immediately, because I know how scary that must be for them, I'll tell them, I'll take it off like that. And I'll go, it's oxygen and it's how I breathe, you know? And older people all go now I know what up your nose with a rubber hose meant.

**Diane:** You're pretty irreverent.

**Joanne:** I am irreverent, but ...

**Diane:** So people do sometimes treat you differently. Are they a little more, you know, not condescending, but?

**Joanne:** Yeah, they don't think you know a lot.

**Diane:** Why is it? That drives me crazy. They make this assumption that because you're older, you don't know as much as they do or you know, whatever.



**Joanne:** I don't know, who knows why that is. But I think that part of it goes back to that we're not interacting with the kids enough and that they feel comfortable with it. You know? I mean, they don't go as much to see the grandparents as they used to. Some here on the island do because the island is protected from that some a little bit.

**Diane:** Because there's so many generations living here in a small space, basically.

**Joanne:** Right, right. right.

**Diane:** I'm curious, what makes it a good day for you.

**Joanne:** Meeting with somebody that I can, you know, like I met a couple the other day on the road that's going to be calling me from Owl's head. Meeting people that I've never met before. Chatting with them about their lives and stuff. That gets makes a good day for me. And knowing that my grandchildren are okay.

**Diane:** Do you ever get lonely?

**Joanne:** Yes. Like I said this morning to somebody I said, oh man, I wish I had a man in my life, when she asked me what I wanted on the menu. She wants a man. You know just somebody to hug, you know what I mean? Every time I've met somebody, I compare them or the ones that are really nice are married and I would never ever ever go there. But I don't know, just, but I've got kids that stop by. My one daughter stops by every day. The other one calls me every day. I've got family, you know. My middle daughter is coming Wednesday.

**Joanne:** This is one thing I've been doing. It's more fun than you could ever know. I was given this hat because it's a blessing of the fleet. What they do is when the lobsterman start off, they have a doctor here, who's also a minister. He does his blessing of the fleet. And I used to love to go, but I just can't do it anymore. So somebody brought me the hat. And I thought you know what I'm gonna do, I'm gonna get all the lobstermen to sign my hat. So these are all the lobstermen and they can't wait to sign it. Which is so cool. Oh, Joanne, your hat, you know. So I've got I think, I think I only have about six more to go.

**Diane:** And then you'll have them all.

**Joanne:** And I'll have them all. So now people are saying to me, can you make copies of that so we could do, they want to auction it off. You're not auctioning off my hat.

**Diane:** Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you any, you know, important message you want to impart anything and advice, any lesson learned? You think might benefit somebody else who's getting older or somebody who's younger?

**Joanne:** Try to do it gracefully. If you're older, try to still have fun. Like I'm going to try to teach bridge this winter, see if I can get some of that going. I know myself I'm very hyper and I need to get something going and encourage your grandkids. Encourage your grandkids like I have things hanging here my room you can't see but I'm kind of surrounded by my grandchildren. I told one that lives here on the island that I wanted something to hang up from her. And she painted me on a guitar, basically. To me, that's joy.

**Joanne:** I've enjoyed it. I enjoyed talking to you. Yeah, I said if there's any cameras, I'm not interested. But you know, I don't mind just sitting at talking about it.

**Diane:** So you've had a good time.

**Joanne:** Yes. I've enjoyed it.

**Diane:** I've enjoyed it as well. Thank you.

You've been listening to *Conversations About Aging*, a Catching Health special series. I'm Diane Atwood and I've been talking with Joanne Santee, who's 78 years old and lives at Southern Harbor House, a beautiful extended care facility on North Haven Island, off the coast of Rockland, Maine.

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You'll find pictures of Joanne, a written transcript of our interview, more information about Southern Harbor House, and other conversations about aging at [CatchingHealth.com](http://CatchingHealth.com).

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