



Conversations About Aging: Paul Quinn, 80 November 4, 2019

Diane: Welcome to Conversations About Aging, A Catching Health podcast. I'm Diane Atwood and I'm traveling the state Maine talking with people 60 and above about what it's like to be growing older or as my husband likes to say, living longer.

In the last episode, my sister and I took the ferry from Rockland over to North Haven Island, where I interviewed 78 year-old Joanne Santee. Because of health issues, she decided to move into Southern Harbor House, the first and only extended care facility on the Island.

My next guest has ties to Southern Harbor House and may someday decide to move in, but for now he lives with his wife in the house that used to be his grandfather's. His entire life -- 80 years long has been tied to North Haven. He has lots stories to tell, some funny, some thoughtful, some gut wrenching.

Paul: My name is Paul Quinn. I'm a retired electrician here on the island. I've done many other areas of pursuit to make a living. I've been a boat builder, a teacher, an electrician, a code enforcement officer and I guess that covers most of my professional endeavors.

Diane: Were you born here?

Paul: I was. But my father was one of those who had to leave the island. He was too old for the draft but too young not to do something. He was a very skilled boat builder. And he ended up going to Camden and working at the Camden Shipyard building wooden minesweepers. They didn't attract the mines, the steel ships did but the wooden ones could pick them up and clear the harbors. So that's what he did during the war years.

Diane: And so you were born by then and...

Paul: I was born right, well, I was born on North Haven, pseudo. There was a birthing center on Vinalhaven at that time. Dr. Earl staffed it. It was down by the old Masonic Hall

and all of the ladies that were childbearing or pregnant during those six or seven years, went down there and waited, had the children and then came back home.

Diane: But did you live here your whole childhood?

Paul: No, I didn't. I was seriously deformed at birth. I had a severe cleft palate and harelip. And, uh, there was a temporary doctor here on the island at the time. He made a suggestion to my mother that they take me halfway to Rockland on the boat.

Diane: Oh, that's so, that's awful. How could a doctor ever, ever suggest something like that to a mother? What'd your mother do?

Paul: Yeah, well, she didn't go halfway to Rockland.

Paul: She was a very tenacious 19 or 20-year-old young woman coming off, during the war years, coming off this little island, she saw to it that I had the best possible care. Took me into the Lahey Clinic. All of the operations were done there but they were a little too soon. Now they don't do it quite as soon, they let the bones form a little more. And that's what caused my deafness, the early corrective surgery on my cleft palate and things.

Diane: So tell me, so a cleft palate means that you, was it open up in the roof of your mouth and your lip was kind of split?

Paul: Yes. They had to force-feed me, squeeze a tube, hold your nose to make sure it got down.

Diane: How old were you when you had the surgery?

Paul: A year.

Diane: And now when did they do it?

Paul: They like to wait until at least adolescence.

Diane: That long? So that you would go all those years with the cleft palate?

Paul: Yeah, the bones are still growing. That's the reason they do it. They uh, as I understand the process, it, the more, the longer they can wait, the better it is. But of course, there is a price to pay in appearance in grade school. Children can be mean.

Diane: Were they mean to you even though you had the surgery?

Paul: Oh, yeah.

Diane: Tell me about that.

Paul: Yeah, they called me frog face.

Diane: So they say things like that build character.

Paul: Well, I don't know that I would change any of that now. I never knew I was deaf myself until I got a hearing aid in the seventh grade. That did open up a few worlds.

Diane: So maybe you didn't even hear half the things they said to you?

Paul: Well, probably not.

Diane: That's a good thing. Because it sounds like they were cruel.

Paul: No more than anyone else. I was also a little overweight. There were three of us in school there in Camden. And we were known collectively as three fatsos.

Diane: Well, you seem like a really nice, kind, gentle man now.

Paul: Well, because of my mother's early intervention, and as I grew older, I actually was not an unattractive person and I had opportunities, I think, that were afforded me because of my mother's tenacity and seeing that I was given a normal life. I think. I credit her a great deal, as I say. She was just a 19, 20-year-old girl off this island. And she would not have anything less than the best for me.

Diane: And so that meant too, that by having a normal childhood, she didn't coddle you?

Paul: Oh, absolutely not. No, my grandfather lived here on the island and my father built a new house down in Sleepyville and I decided one day I wanted to go see my grandfather. And so I grabbed my tricycle and took off. My mother caught up with me right at the base of Kent's Hill down in the village there by the Casino Wharf. I can still, I remember that vividly. Every time she caught up with me, run a little swat across the bottom and I'd pedal a little bit harder down, and went right home.

Diane: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

Paul: I have a sister seven years younger than I am.

Diane: And is she still alive? Oh, yes. And you have a good relationship with her?

Paul: Yes, excellent. Yeah, she'll be coming up here later this month.

Diane: So even though your dad worked in Camden, you lived here on the island?

Paul: No.

Paul: We moved to Camden and I went to school in Camden.

Diane: And when did ...

Paul: I started school here. I started kindergarten here. But that was because my, my sister was being born in 1944. And it was a difficult pregnancy so mother sent me over here to live with my grandparents and I started school over here and then went back.

Diane: So how long did you live in Camden?

Paul: I graduated from Camden High School.

Diane: So you basically grew up in Camden and at some point, you came back to North Haven?

Paul: Well, I came back every school vacation and every other chance I came. I had a unique situation. My father came from Eagle Island, which is just up the bay here. The two Islands have a long history of cooperation with each other. But I was either on Eagle Island with that grandparents or over here with these grandparents every summer, every school vacation. I lived in Camden to go to school, only.

Diane: What's it like to basically grow up on an island?

Paul: Well, it's like stepping back into a previous century. I milked cows, I harnessed horses, we plowed gardens, we were basically, well, my grandmother on Eagle, cause Eagle is a much smaller Island than North Haven, but my grandmother over there had the attitude basically, to turn us out in the morning. It's an island, you can't get off.

Diane: So you're basically safe.

Paul: Yeah, we were free to roam the whole island. Those were good years.

Diane: What made you decide to then settle down here? And when did it happen?

Paul: Well, it was a while in happening. I went to Maine Maritime after high school for a year, then I went to the University of Maine for a year. Both places I studied engineering, electrical engineering, just a base course, and then I switch my major into Arts and English with a side major in education, so I graduated from University of Maine in 1962 with a BA in English literature and a teaching certificate, a BS basically, in education. After I graduated, my grandfather over here started a process, ending off as a double amputee. And I came home for good in about 1965 and ended up taking care of him, living with him taking care of him and I inherited the house, and basically, just made a life from there.

Diane: How old are you?

Paul: I'm 80. And when were you born? 1939. What's your birthday? April 19, 1939.

Diane: So you inherited your grandfather's place. Yes. And you've lived here ever since 1965, basically, and is this where you met, you're married? Oh, yeah. Oh, yes, because you told me your wife is a librarian. Yeah. Did you meet here on the island? Is she an island girl?

Paul: We met in 1949. She was about six months old.

Diane: And when did you reconnect?

Paul: In March of 1971. I had, she had graduated from high school. I noticed her.

Paul: After we met and reconnected and got, we both know we wanted to be home and on the island and live here. But in order to do that, you can't just go out early on and pick a career and then just walk over and do it. When you're on an island like this, you have to find a need and fill it. And I ended up as a lineman for the power company and an electrician. When I first come over maybe two or three years before that, I started out as a fisherman and a boat builder. She actually had two stints at the library, she was a librarian here early on and then she stopped and raised the kids and then she went back.

Diane: So you made your home here. You got married ...

Paul: We got married in '71, same year we met in March, we were married in September. We've been married 48 years now.

Diane: Good years. Very. Tell me about your family. How many kids do you have?

Paul: We had two kids. Still here on the island going back and forth. She'd worked with me you quite a lot, as an electrician. Actually, we're still doing a little bit. I don't do an awful lot now. And I had a son Gregory enjoyed him, I enjoyed him very much. He died three years

ago. He, uh, he had a 15, a 16 year battle with brain cancer. It was eating away at his skull socket. But he made it to 36.

Diane: I can't imagine what it was like for you.

Paul: It was hard to see the hope go out of his eyes. He had finally, he tried to get better and tried to get better operation after operation. Finally they actually took his eye and I think that worried him. But when they did it, he had taught himself, he was an entertainer and a songwriter, and he was very good one and in order to rebuild the eye socket, it was sinew and things, they took cords and tendons out of his left arm and it left him essentially unable to play the guitar. And he felt like the one thing he could do. Was it John Milton? When I consider how my light is spent in this dark world and wide, and that one talent which is death to hide, lodged with me useless. I think he felt like that as long as blindness.

Diane: Is that when the hope started to die?

Paul: I think so, yes. I think that's an apt time, yes.

Diane: So how did you and your wife and your daughter move on after that? After he passed away?

Paul: We each reacted differently. I put him out of my mind and tried not to think about him at all. Kate buried herself in everything Gregory, dug up all his songs, copied them down and published him all the music that he had recorded, she put on CDs and Amber just, I don't know what approach her mindset was, more along with a mother's than mine.

Diane: So three years is not a long time. But some time has passed. Are you in a different place now with it?

Paul: Oh, yeah, I'm comfortable with it. I see in the past some regrets. I was of a practical bent by nature and him playing guitar and singing songs, sort of like the grasshopper, you know. Onset of winter and you're not preparing, and uh, but he, now I'm looking back I see that he was truly a talent and it was his calling. And I didn't, I regret sincerely that I never encouraged him in it. I kept saying, oh get a real job.

Diane: And you wish sometimes that you could go back and tell him that?

Paul: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

Diane: That's a tough lesson to learn. But it's a beautiful lesson and I appreciate that you're willing to talk about it. Because somebody else will hear that.

Paul: Well, I'd rather have people hear about him then just make him a closed chapter and nobody knew he existed.

Diane: You make me think of how sometimes when a person dies, other people have no idea what to say to the family or the loved ones.

Paul: His funeral, and we waited two weeks after he passed before we had the service. And the church was full, the anteroom was full. All the chairs were set up on the lawn and they were full and probably 50 to 100 people standing outside the church. And they were playing Gregory's songs over the loudspeaker all through the service. He was, he was loved and he was known.

Diane: You told me you're 80 years old now. Yes. So did you have your kids then later?

Paul: I was 32 when Kate and I were married. Amber was born four years later. So I was 36 when Amber was born and Greg was seven years later. He was born in 85, 82, excuse me. He was born in 82 so I was 43 when he was born.

Diane: When the kids were growing up, they grew up here on the island?

Paul: They did. They graduated from this high school right here.

Diane: So you talked about the fun that you had coming out here on summers and whatnot. Was there anything in particular that you wanted to make sure your kids could experience growing up on an island?

Paul: Yeah, they both went lobstering, hauling by hand, learned to use a boat to get around. Amber went sterning with a number of fishermen over here.

Diane: You live on an island in Maine, you've got to know how to lobster, right?

Paul: You gotta do that, yes. I like to carry a little further and tell you I built my, with the aid of my friend Bud Thayer, we built two or three boats, one of them was mine, we put it over in 1965 and I sold it about 25 years later to a summer person over here. And she's still going.

Diane: So it looks like you're a really good boat builder.

Paul: Between the two of us, yeah, he principally, but I wanted to learn. I had the rudimentary skills I had worked on boats with my father and I admired Edwin and I knew he was a real boat builder and I wanted him to build me one. So he did but I was with him through every step of it. Now I have a 38-foot lobster boat in my shop that I probably will

never finish. I've been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. I've had it for six years. And I don't demonstrate a lot of the symptoms but I can't, soon as I grip a tool and start to squeeze it, I start the tremors.

Diane: How did you even discover that you had Parkinson's? What were your symptoms?

Paul: Uh, this side weak. My arm got weak and this one does tremor.

Diane: This is your left arm so your left side started to get weak the tremors and did your walking change at all?

Paul: Well, I think that's one of the prime ways to assess whether a person has Parkinson' or not, is your gait. And when I went the first time to a neurologist, she just said walk, well, she didn't even say, go down that office on the left there. I'll be right in. She just watched me walk down the hallway and wrote out a prescription for CarbiDopa/LevoDopa, you've got Parkinson's.

Diane: You kind of have a little shuffle, right? Yes. You've had it now for seven years did you say? Six years. Six years. How has that changed your life?

Paul: Well, it stopped me working on that boat. I've been the code enforcement officer for buildings over here for almost 30 years and you have to keep up. You have to have a license and you have to keep up credits every year and I was on my way to a seminar to keep my credit up on zoning and ready to get on the boat in the morning and during the night, something had happened in the furnace on the boat it quit too freezing cold in there. So they said we will delay sailing for half an hour and warm things up. So I wandered over to Brown's Boatyard right next door to the ferry dock. I saw Foyer there; he was taking an engine out of an old wooden boat. And I said what are you doing? And he said, well I did some work on her and caulked some seams and put some new garboards on her and never got paid so I'm taking the engine for the yard bill. I said, well, what are you gonna do with her, with the boat when you get the engine out? He said, we got one on the trailer now hauling up the transfer station, when we get her off we'll come down and get this one, take them up there and burn em both. And I said, well, I think it's a damn shame. If I had her, I'd restore her. I came back three days later from that seminar 10 feet of that boat was stuck in back of my garage and the rest was sitting in my driveway.

Diane: That was kind of them but it still needs to be restored.

Paul: Well I've done a lot on it. I've got almost \$1,000 worth of African mahogany in the stern. I put a new stern in her, put new timbers in her all the way up to the engine. That was my first mistake. It didn't go far enough. When you timber an old boat like that you go

out beyond the engine and didn't. I left four sets in there and that stopped me because I can't do anything else until I go back and do those four sets of timbers.

Diane: Can you hire somebody?

Paul: No, I couldn't afford it. And I'd probably be right on their back all the time anyway they wouldn't do it to satisfy me.

Diane: So nobody would want to work for you, anyway?

Paul: That's probably not true cause I had a lot of people working for me over the years as electrical contractors.

Diane: Well, there must be something because it sounds like it's something you'd like to see done.

Paul: Oh, I'd like to get that boat done. Yes. I haven't even been in my shop for two or three years. I had to build a shop around that boat. I built a 24 by 40 foot building around that boat while it was sitting there in my yard.

Diane: That's pretty funny. Must be frustrating not to be able to make your body do what it used to do.

Paul: I sit in my window at the house every morning at breakfast, looking out at that shop and thinking I built that shop, I've got that boat, I can't do any more with it.

Diane: So what do you do with your days?

Paul: This year is the only time that I haven't been working regularly. I gave it up about a year ago. My brother in law has pretty much taken over what I did, and my daughter's working with him.

Diane: With these new challenges that you have, what makes it a good day for you if you can't do the things that you use them enjoy doing?

Paul: Well, that's a very insightful question. I feel that I'm wasting my time sitting around in my chair watching TV all day. That's what I'm doing. And I'm pretty much reached the point where I'm disgusted with myself and I'm going to try to do something anyway.

Diane: So what you're going to try to do something anyway, what are you going to try to do?

Paul: Whatever the physical effect is on me I know I don't care. I'm going to get out in the shop, clean it out and get back to work.

Diane: Maybe you could get somebody who doesn't mind being bossed around.

Paul: There are so few people left with wooden boat skills. Everything's fiberglass now and to find anyone that has even a most rudimentary knowledge of wooden boat building is tough. Because it's a dead end, it's a nowhere skill that's dying. Pretty much gone.

Diane: So if you didn't have Parkinson's and you had the strength left in your fingers, that's what you'd be doing.

Paul: Yeah, absolutely. You'd be out there working ... That boat would be out of my shop and on a mooring out in the thoroughfare somewhere.

Diane: You can still drive. Oh, yeah. I just wondered because of your hands but it's the fine motor or is the holding on to things ...

Paul: My fine motor skills are there. No driving is not a problem at all. In general, the more physically active you can be the better.

Diane: And so do you have an opportunity? Is there anything here on the island that you can go to?

Paul: Bout all I do is, once a day, at least, I walk the dog somewhere on the island, Mullen's Head or Crabtree Point or something, walking for probably a good mile.

Diane: Well, that's good. Are there any exercise programs here for older people, in general?

Paul: Yeah, there's the YMCA down in the village. I've never availed myself of the services.

Diane: Might be time. Get you out, too, out from in front of the television set.

Paul: Well, I played the lead part in a in a production here at Waterman's Center last year. And that was another thing my son, my son was a brilliant actor. He did Glass Menagerie and several shows with Bill and Courtney. Yeah, he was an excellent actor and an excellent performer, stage performer. But I've done a lot of it over my time, too.

Diane: Are there still opportunities for you to do that?

Paul: Probably, I haven't, I haven't gone back yet. I dedicated that performance a year ago, my son, said one more time on the stage for Greg.

Diane: Tell me, do you have a favorite place here?

Paul: Yeah, we do. We had a little piece of shorefront over here on Southern Harbor that we had to sell. But that was where my grandfather kept his traps and where I used to walk over me when he came in. It's still there, but it isn't the same.

Diane: What's your connection here? Do you think that someday you may want to or need to move into a place like here?

Paul: I hope if I have to move into a place like this, that it would be this place and not something on the mainland, yes.

Diane: Because would that be your other option if you have to move into a place? There's nothing else?

Paul: No, there's not. This is the first venture of its kind on the island.

Diane: And it sounds like you're 100% behind what they're doing.

Paul: Oh, I am absolutely. This house belongs to friends of mine in church. And I wired the house.

Diane: if you're Parkinson's gets to the point where you need to be cared for in a different way, you would much prefer to come to here if you can then have to.

Paul: I prefer to come here then stay home even because I don't want to be a burden. Kate's 10 years younger than I am. Chances are pretty good that could happen.

Diane: Now that you're older, do you find that people treat you any differently than they used to when you were say in your 40s?

Paul: Yes. How so? I don't think people hold the elderly to such high a standard as they did in the past. Yeah, when they were at their peak.

Diane: Can you give me an example? Can you remember any examples of how you were in a situation and somebody treated you in a different way?

Paul: Well, mostly physically. I may well have lost a step or two mentally but I don't think so. But physically, yes. I was a very strong man once. I hauled 100 traps a day by hand

lobstering. I moved appliances, refrigerators, stoves, anything. Now I start to move a stove or something, somebody will to run all the way across the street to help me or take over and push the unit into place or something.

Diane: And how do you feel when they do that?

Paul: I'd like to kick him out of the way and finish what I was doing.

Diane: Now let's be realistic. Could you use their help?

Paul: Yes, yes, this side is so weak. I just can't do it.

Diane: Do you resent getting older in any way?

Paul: For that reason, yes, getting weaker.

Diane: My husband's aunt used to say that, something about you know, once you hit 50 it's patch, patch, patch, and you know ...

Paul: I'm gonna say 50 I didn't notice a hitch. 60 slowed me down a little. 70 I really had to work to keep up with what I was used to doing and now I can't keep it up anymore. When I first came home after college, building a boat and stuff over here, there was a, my partner Bud used to work for the local electrician during the winters when he couldn't fish. That partner died the first year Bud and I were together. The old man died and that left Bud who was 10 years older than I was at the time with the business handed right to him. And he said well, I'm going to take it, he says. I said, well, that's fine. I said I'll give you a hand through the winter until the time to set the traps again. I ain't got my traps out yet. In 10 years I took the business over from him and he started his boatyard over here, Whynot Boatyard. That's how I got into the electrical business. I took over, well, Bud and Lewis was in his 60s and Bud didn't really didn't like to do it. That's when I started. I was a lineman for the power company for 20 years.

Diane: Here on the island?

Paul: Yes, and for the first 10, I didn't even have a bucket truck

Diane: What did you do?

Paul: Climbed, on spurs.

Diane: You climbed up the poles on spurs?

Paul: And when we set new poles, we dug a hole in the ground, and interesting, you take, you dig a hole in the ground and you pile all the dirt up in front of the hole, then you take the pole when you lay it on the ground on top of that dirt pile just above your hole. And then you start lifting it into place, lifting it up, until, have what you call a pike pole. You jam underneath. You lift it up so far and you jam a pole and it breaks down and push it more and more and more finally, as your stand up totally it'll slide off that pile of dirt and then down into the hole. And then you just put the dirt back in the hole and go to the next one.

Diane: That sounds like it's an art.

Paul: It's damn hard work what it is.

Diane: You don't miss it.

Paul: I really do. I think as a job, you know, an hourly paid job, I really enjoyed doing it. And I have to say, there was a public presence about it and awareness. You're the lineman. You are somebody. I felt that.

Diane: It's nice because you're contributing, you're contributing to your community.

Paul: And again, the reason that I got the job or did the job is because everybody else was scared to death of electricity. And I had a rudimentary knowledge of how things work, two years in Maine, Maine Maritime. I retired from the lines in 1985 and they well, shortly, two years after that, I elected to the board of directors. And I served 30 years on that board and that's one of the things I'm proudest of what I have done. We took that we formed that company Fox Island Electric, and we put cable across the bay and formed a company for almost 30 years, we ran on that cable. We had a lot of troubles, but we made a go with the cooperative and I'm very proud of we did. But after, that first cable, they made a mistake when they laid it. And it didn't. It wasn't a single cable, it was four cables stretched 100 yards apart, all the way across the bay, three active and a spare. But they were strung without a survey and they went over undersea mountain show it would cross over this hump, drop down into the bottom, come up over the next hump. And the tide going up and down the bay sawed those things back and forth just as thought you were working your way through an iron bar with a hacksaw. Oh, no. And by the time 30 years had gone by, we had at least 30 splices in every single one of those four cables.

Diane: 1

And you'd have to dive down to get them?

Paul: Prop Marine would have to come and fix every time we had a short and boy, we had a lot of them at the end of it.

Diane: So that brought electricity to the island.

Paul: Before the co-op was formed electricity was generated by diesel was in Vinalhaven and transferred up the island.

Diane: So that's one of the things that you're most proud of that you helped bring.

Paul: Well, I'm almost as proud as I got rid of that cable. We ran another cable in a ship. We bought a cable and it comes with a sled. And it buries itself in the bottom as you lay it, puts it two or three feet deep in the bottom. And we ran a second cable and hooked that one up and have not had a fault since in 20 years.

Diane: So you were partly responsible for that then.

Paul: And we were also responsible for the wind towers over here.

Diane: What do the wind towers do?

Paul: Well, they're a way of stabilizing the price of electricity for the island because it's designed to net zero. In other words, in a year, we sell as much electricity as we buy so no matter what the price is, what we pay and what we get, they climb with each other. And that stabilizes the price of electricity. They can't just charge us anything they want from the mainland.

Diane: Okay. We're gonna run out of time because we have to catch the ferry there's a couple other questions I want to ask you just about you. You mentioned, it seems like you are very outgoing individual who likes being with people and is it harder for you now? Has your social life changed?

Paul: Yes, much less of it.

Diane: And how does that make you move through your day? Does it make you unhappy?

Paul: No, because the times are changing as well as the people around me so I'm content with what I've chosen and the way I'm going.

Diane: Which is?

Paul: Maintaining the old friends not working particularly hard to make new ones.

Diane: Do you ever get lonely?

Paul: No. No I don't. I like to say that I can keep myself company in my own mind. I've got so many things I'd like to do. I replay them, how I would do if I could or what I will do. So, no, I keep the, I keep my mind active.

Diane: Do you have any advice you'd like to pass along to anybody?

Paul: I think that's presumptuous.

Diane: Everybody has a little bit of advice something that they have learned.

Paul: I don't really have any singular gem.

Diane: You don't have a singular gem but I have to say that you seem like a gem to me.

Paul: Well, that's very very nice of you. Yeah, it's, it's been a, it's been a great run.

Diane: Not over yet.

Paul: It's necessary to accept some things now that I would have fought desperately against 10 or 15 years ago. You kinda got to go with the flow.

Diane: Well, that was good advice. And I thank you for it and thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. I've enjoyed it.

Paul: Well, I'm glad to do it.

Diane: Now we're off to catch the ferry.

Paul: Have a good trip.

CLOSE

You've been listening to *Conversations About Aging*, a Catching Health Podcast. I'm Diane Atwood and I've been talking with Paul Quinn a lifelong resident of North Haven Island, off the coast of Rockland, Maine

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