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Conversations About Aging

Alma Thomas, 96

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Diane: Welcome to Conversations About Aging, a Catching Health podcast. I'm Diane Atwood and I'm traveling throughout my home state of Maine talking to people 60 and above about what it's like to be getting older. Today I'm in Falmouth enjoying a conversation with Alma, who is 96 years old.

Alma: My name is Alma Thomas.

Diane: Alma Thomas, and you were born Alma Will?

Alma: Alma Wilkes. Alma Wilkes. That's an English name. My father came from England was born and Yonkers, New York.

Diane: You know, I saw those pictures and I hope you'll let me take pictures of the pictures. But I'm your your father's family looks very British. And your mother's family looks like they knew how to have a good time and they looked very elegant.

Alma: Yes, it's a very interesting family. I was one of the youngest children of 10. So that most of my elder ancestors had passed away by the time I came along. I only knew one grandmother and no grandfathers. That's kind of sad. Yeah, it was but it was an age thing that I didn't have an opportunity and they didn't either.

Diane: So you were the next to the youngest, were you?

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Alma: That's right. I was number nine.

Diane: You know, I think of, that I come from a large family of eight kids, but 10 seems vast.

Alma: It is. But we had a very close family and lived together with each other forever. They all lived in New York. I'm the only one that moved away. I moved to Maine in 1951. But the rest of them stayed in New York City and Bronx or environs of New York, anyway.

Diane: Tell me what it's like to grow up as the next to the youngest of 10 though, what do you think it is that kept the family close?

Alma: The parents, the parents. They do the work. Dad played games with us, mother was busy all the time with us, of course, and then we always had the company of the other sisters and brothers or I did. So I didn't feel as if I was number nine ever till they started dying off. Then I realized how many there were. But up until then I just was part of the family. And you had fun. Oh, God, yes. I did. I did. My family were brought up very much Catholic. We went to Catholic school. You sit in your desk, you pay attention to the sister and sister says no, you don't do it. Some of us and I'm afraid to say I was not very obedient all the time. But my other sisters were very much brought up in the Catholic style. You do what you're told. You sit down and be quiet and you say yes and no.

Diane: Now I remember my mother saying because I was the oldest that I was the learning child. And then with each subsequent child, I think she got a little looser.

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Diane: Do you think that by the time you came along in your family that your mother maybe wasn't as strict or your father wasn't?

Alma: Oh, I think she had it down cold by the time I drew along. She just said let, go ahead, blaze away was her favorite thing. Go ahead. It's not gonna kill you, blaze away. So I think I think she just rolled with the punches by then.

Diane: And what about your older sisters and brothers? Did they look out for you?

Alma: Oh, yes, my sister Betty was the oldest and she was the one that had to take the responsibility for the family. Being the oldest is not the easiest, because the diapers have to be changed, the babies have to be taken care of while they're taking care of number three, four and five. And I remember having, I fell and cut my eye and it was a very bad cut. And the only person to take you to the hospital was my oldest sister Betty because she was, she had a car and she was the only one. So the oldest sister is kind of like the second mom.

Diane: I can attest to that. You never feel like you're quite one of the gang.

Alma: Oh, she felt as if she was one of the gang, but she was in charge of the gang.

Diane: And you just went around and [played]. Yeah, so you were a bit of a hellraiser?

Alma: A little bit? Yeah. Yeah. And I haven't changed a lot.

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Diane: Well, that's good to hear. I could tell and when we were having lunch together, there's quite a few sparks that were ...

Alma: They're still there. Yeah.

Diane: When were you born?

Alma: March 15, 1923.

Diane: And, of course, you don't remember on the day you were born, but as you're growing up, what was the world like?

Alma: The world was just a ball of fun. I had a little friend next door, John. John and I played together. We used to play, oh making cars out of old car seats or a peach basket and we'd take trips. He would stay in the driver's seat and I would sit in the backseat, and we would travel to Syracuse or someplace like that. New York and, and we made our own fun.

Diane: So there was a lot of imagination involved.

Alma: Yeah, completely. And then there were parks. We used to go to the parks and they had special games for us and you know, the old tag and all those games that were always fun. But growing up, we always had companionship.

Diane: And as you got into high school, what was it like for you at that age?

Alma: Well, we left Yonkers when I was in the second year of high school, and my parents lost their house in the depression. They, uh, went bankrupt. So we had to we had a beautiful house, a 14 room house there with a

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lovely, lovely setting and everything. And we had to, we moved to the Bronx to a walk-up apartment.

Diane: Okay, so by then most of your brothers and sisters have left home?

Alma: Some, no they were still there, six or seven were still home, and one or two had moved on. But we had I think there were five or six bedrooms in that apartment. And some of my sisters got married off one at a time. I'm talking about the 1940s during the war after the war, and married one at a time. I was the last one to get married.

Diane: Okay. Tell me about your parents going bankrupt. How did that happen?

Alma: Well, it was the depression they had, the banks closed and they had their money in the bank and they couldn't get it out. That was it. Do you remember? They couldn't keep up the payments on their house. And it was It was, just, they were evicted.

Diane: Were you old enough to realize anything about what was going on?

Alma: Not really, I didn't realize it. But of course, when you're 13, 14, 15 years old, it's all about me. And I was going to a school that I liked. It was that was at it was away from Yonkers but it was a bus trip. And I'm going to lose all my friends and I don't want to move there. I can't be. Nobody will love me there and all this kind of stuff, which a teenager would do. So I was not really resentful, but certainly not happy to be having to move away from everything that was familiar to me.

Diane: Do you remember how they tried to explain it to you?

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Alma: No, they just said we have to do it.

Diane: So they didn't go into any more detail?

Alma: Nothing about that. They didn't tell me anything about the mortgage. I learned that 20 years later. Really? Yeah.

Diane: So tell me about the new neighborhood you moved into.

Alma: It was mostly Catholic people that lived in the area. And it was entirely different from where we were out in the country before. And I had two years of high school. And then we after high school I got a job working as a typist and a stenographer in New York.

Diane: In that time that you lived in the walk-up, that's what you called it, a walk-up? Did you notice any changes in say how your parents were or how they moved in the world? Were they different?

Alma: I don't think I didn't notice probably. They were still my parents and they still had their rules. And I had to follow the rules of course and get through school and go out and get a job. And my other sisters, some of them could find work, some of them couldn't find work. So they were tough times for all of us, I guess. I mean, I was making like 12 or \$15 a week. Of that, I had to give one third to my parents to help.

Diane: Did your father ever lose his job?

Alma: My father was a musician and he was also an organ builder. And he built an organ down in St. Peter's Church on Church Street, New York,

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which is right near the World Trade Center. It's the oldest Catholic Church in New York. And after he completed the organ, it was such a huge and expensive organ with like five or 6000 pipes, no one could play it. So they hired him to play the organ. And that's where he, he worked as a church organist. And then he also taught music in schools.

Diane: And he was able to continue doing that kind of work during the Depression?

Alma: Yeah, but, of course, he was getting like 25 cents a lesson for teaching music or 50 cents if it was a special student, something like that.

Diane: So, here you are, early teenage, when the world revolves around you. You had to go to a different school, you had to move to a different neighborhood. And would you say that your lifestyle in general changed?

Alma: Oh, yeah, I would say it had changed but when you're that age, you know, there's compensation for everything. When you're that age, you fall in with the new style. And if I were older, I probably couldn't fit in with the new style, but being younger, you just accommodate yourself to what the situation is.

Diane: And you made friends and you were, oh, yeah, you were okay?

Alma: I was easy. I always found it easy to make friends. My sisters didn't always find it easy, but I always found it easy.

Diane: So some of your older sisters had a more difficult time with this transition than you did? Mm-hmm. You went on after high school and you got a job. Thank God you took those typing lessons.

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Diane And you enjoyed what about doing the typing or working in that kind of a job? What did you like about it?

Alma: Oh, I like working in New York. I liked working then around Rockefeller Center. Of course, was, I mean, this was the head of the universe during the war, and all the sailors and soldiers were there and, and that was where everything, that's where the action was in the 40s and 50s and late 30s and 40s, anyway.

Diane: So what kind of action did you like?

Alma: Oh, we used to go to, oh, the movies were the big thing. You could go to the Radio City Music Hall and all those. You went down, took the subway went down for the day and spent it at Radio City Music Hall. And the crowds. I loved the crowds. I loved being I like being part of the crowds. And that was exciting, I thought.

Diane: Of course, the United States was at war then. Correct. And what was that, were you even aware, I mean, at that age about what was happening with the war?

Alma: Oh god, yeah, my classmates were going to because they were 17, 18, 19 years old they were going to war. My brothers, my brother in laws. My sisters were married they were all going to war.

Diane: Did you worry about that? Oh, yeah. Your parents must have been worried sick about it.

Alma: Oh, yeah, yeah, that was, but it was, it was what happened.

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Diane: So it was as if you didn't really have a choice in the matter. You had to go and you had to serve your country and that was that. That's right? But everybody came home safe in your family?

Alma: In my family, yes, they did, fortunately. But all of my classmates did not. Several of them passed away. Some of them were maimed. But it was, see, I got out of high school in 1940 so there was still another five years of war.

Diane: What are some of the ways that your family was affected other than your siblings having to go off and fight in the war? Were their rations and, on gas and what was that all like?

Alma: Oh yeah. You forget about that because you were kind of erase all the. We used to save foil, the cigarette wrappers to save the foil for the war efforts. You'd get one pair of shoes a year and, of course, there were eight girls in my family, so, and somebody always wanted another pair of shoes so poor dad got blistered for his coupon for shoes. And then you had coupons that you could buy meat like three times a week. You could buy only certain amount of butter, eggs, things like that. They were really scarce. You just didn't they just were not there. And if there were eggs available in the supermarket down the street, everybody got in the line. Even if you knew what what was on sale or what they were selling, you knew it was important if they were lined up getting whatever it was at the end of the line.

Diane: So you'd get in the line.

Alma: Yeah, of course. Of course. Yeah.

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Diane: What about when the war ended? Were you in New York City?

Alma: Oh, yeah, I was there for all of victory. parades. VE2, too, and Japanese victory, yeah.

Diane: Describe them for me. What was it like for you to be there?

Alma: Oh, well, we were on the fifth floor in this apartment house. We were throwing things out the window or papers and toilet paper, and streamers or anything we could find and banging pots and pans. It was very, and I went down to Time Square, of course. I didn't happen to see the sailor kissing the girl in Times Square, but I had been there many times with and we went down to Times Square, I guess it was the day after VJ day. And everybody was kissing the servicemen and they were just hugging each other. It was just it was just exciting.

Diane: Did you ever think of enlisting?

Alma: I thought about it but I had a boyfriend. So that changes a lot of things. It does and why wasn't your boyfriend overseas? He was a medical student and he was deferred because of his medical, he'd be going to medical school because they figured they needed the doctors more than they needed some boots on the ground.

Diane: Got it. What kind of work did you do?

Alma: I was a secretary. I was a secretary for one, private secretary first in a small office. And they were made canteen vending machines with five cents for a Hershey bar. Put your nickel in and get a Hershey bar. And

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that's still prevalent today. I worked there for quite all through the war. Yeah. And I loved it. I had a wonderful boss. He was very nice to me, and I stayed there till I got married. How much did you make? I make \$75 a week, more than any of my friends. Wow.

Diane: Well, candy's not five cents anymore. Hardly The war is over. You stayed working in the canteen factory as the secretary. At what point did you meet your husband?

Alma: Well, hey, my brother lived across the street from him in Maine.

Diane: In Maine? In Maine. What was your brother doing up in Maine?

Alma: He was an insurance salesman, and he lived across the street from my husband and his wife was still living and his family and her family, their family. And he used to come to New York for conventions. And the convention center was at the Commodore Hotel, which was right across the street from the Chrysler Building. And they used to entertain the salesman from out of town. And they would give you free dinners and free shows and they could bring whoever they want to show Joe used to take me to a lot of the parties so I could meet some young fellows and get to know somebody.

Diane: By now has the medical student moved on or have you moved on from him?

Alma: He dumped me. Oooh. But I saw Joe, maybe two or three times a year, and his wife was still living and encouraged it. What do you mean encouraged it? Well, she felt sorry because I got dumped and then she said you're going to all these parties. Why don't you bring her and introduce her to some of the young men you meet at these conventions?

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Diane: Okay. So you got to know Joe but then his wife passed away?

Alma: She had a heart condition, rheumatic heart fever.

Diane: And by then you knew Joe, and you knew he had five kids. Yeah. At what point did you fall in love and decide, okay, I can raise these five kids?

Alma: Well, it was a big surprise. He just said you want to get married? And I said, Okay.

Diane: It sounds romantic. But was it? I mean, were you in love with him?

Alma: It was pretty practical. Well, I knew him well, I'd seen him, been seeing him for three or four years. I know his way, his style of living, his way of living. It was better than what I had. And he was a very, very charming guy, very, very sociable and charming. And we get along well together, we stayed, we were married for 67 years.

Diane: So you had known Joe through your brother for several years, gotten to know him as just a fellow human being. And then his wife passed away. And one day he says, hey, you want to get married? And you said, Yeah, sure. Yeah. Pretty much what it was like?

Alma: That's right. And it was a good decision. Yes, it was. And we got married very short, within two or three months. He might have asked me in January, we were married in March.

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Diane: And you moved from New York, which is a place you loved, to Maine, where there aren't nearly the crowds you like to get into when you're in New York City.

Alma: Yeah, but there was plenty of action. Five kids. Different action.

Diane: And you lived in Westbrook, Maine. Yes. Okay. So tell me what it was like for you. How old are you by this time?

Alma: 27, 28.

Diane: What was it like for you to give up that life that you love so much and a job that you loved, to move to Maine, and to suddenly be the stepmother of five kids?

Alma: Well, this was about 1950, 1951. New York was in very bad shape in the early 1950s. A lot of crime, a lot of corruption, a lot of police brutality. And New York was not the fun place it used to be. It was getting to be dangerous to go out at night and it was not perfect. And it was a bad time for New York. And it was a good time for me to get out of New York.

Diane: What was it about Maine that you liked? Like I'm imagining that you have the pros and the cons.

Alma: I didn't mind leaving New York at that time I had been I had my fill of it. I'd been there long enough it was time to get married. And I wasn't, course y'all lost that time during the war when people were getting married and I didn't. And so I was I was ready to settle down to something different, really. And I didn't feel as if I was leaving anything. I felt I was going to something.

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Diane: That's nice. That's really nice. And how was it with the kids? Did they accept you?

Alma: Uh, they did, they did. Their mother did a very good job. She always knew she was going to pass away. And she was very careful. And she told me at one time that that if she was going to pass away, he's gonna have to have somebody else to take care of those five children. And she didn't want five misbehaved children. It'd be bad enough to have five children without having them misbehave so she was really kind of strict with them and make sure that they were on the right road.

Diane: Oh, that seems pretty magnificent, actually. So you knew his wife before she passed?

Alma: I met her a few times, not a lot but I met her three or four times, but I didn't know her well.

Diane: But enough to know that she knew she was going to die and she wanted to prepare her kids in a way.

Alma: I think so.

Diane: How old were the kids when you moved in?

Alma: The oldest was 17 and the youngest were twins were seven years old.

Diane: Would you say depending on the age of the kids that some of them were more easy to accept you than others?

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Alma: Well, the only one I was concerned about was the oldest girl because she was in charge of the family being the oldest girl, and I was afraid. But I found out that she was quite relieved that she didn't have all that responsibility anymore.

Diane: So were you able to sit down and talk with her about it? Yeah. Yeah. That's wonderful. You hear so many stories about people just putting up walls and not being able to talk about what's really on their minds.

Diane: Okay, so when you move, when you and Joe got married, and you moved to Maine, how long after his wife had died, would you say? I think it was about two years. So when you moved to Maine, the oldest daughter had been taking care of the family for those two years, you say. With help, with help. Ok? there was a housekeeper?

Alma: A housekeeper and a cook. And she had she had physical help with housework, but she was put the babies to bed, you know, get them up in the morning. Get them off in the, you know.

Diane: She had to be the chief nurturer didn't she?

Alma: Yeah, she did. Yeah.

Diane: Were you at all worried about suddenly going from being a single footloose and fancy free woman to suddenly having such a huge amount of responsibility?

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Alma: I guess I was so busy I didn't have time to get worried about that. I just fit in. You said yes, let's go.

Diane: What a great attitude. You just dove in with both feet. Well, luckily, like you said, you were raised with nine other kids so you knew what it was like to be around a family and you had your own parents as examples of good parenting.

Alma: Right. And I had 38 nieces and nephews so I was used to helping out with the babies and taking the older ones, you know, different trips and stuff like that. I was used to having children around.

Diane: So describe for me, like when you put your head down at night in those early years that you were there taking care of the kids, did you put your head down at night and close your eyes and were you satisfied? Were you happy? Were you fulfilled?

Alma: I just was tired. I just my head down and went to sleep.

Diane: What was Joe like?

Alma: My husband? He was a very serious scientist. Have you seen the stamps that you don't have to lick? He was the he was the developer of those stamps. You're kidding. And he has the patent for how to do that, he has a single patent for that, for the company. So then he went overseas and taught other people how to do it for compensation.

Diane: So I remember you told me that he was a scientist who worked at the paper mill . It was SD Warren. Yes. And then it became SAPPI. Where you, was he there when it was SAPPI or.

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Alma: We left just about the time SAPPI took over.

Diane: From now on, anytime I use a stamp I'm going to think of Joe.

Alma: Good, so do I.

Diane: You said that, oh, I don't want to forget this. You, he had his five children but then you had two children together. At what point did those kids come along?

Alma: Louise was nine months and nine days after we got married and Jim came three years later.

Diane: And how did that work out to have these two new siblings introduced to the family?

Alma: Oh, those kids were excited they were delighted with the new baby. Yeah, they just were beside themselves with her and she loved it cuz she got somebody to do things for her and play for her. Take care of she they both loved and it worked out very well.

Diane: That's wonderful. It sounds like you had a really good family. marriage. family life.

Alma: Yeah, I did. I did. I did.

Diane: And then at what point did you leave Westbrook?

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Alma: Well, then we went, Joe, Joe worked when he when he left he did a little bit consulting after he retired. Yeah, I think he had about two years that he consulted. And then we took a, we went on an IESC trip. International Executive Service Corps. It's like a do-good organization that helps developing countries. So we went to Brazil and lived in Rio de Janeiro for three months while he worked for a chemical company there changing over from a textile company to a paper mill.

Diane: What did you do when he was doing that work?

Alma: Well, I learned her Portuguese. And I learned I learned all about Rio de Janeiro.

Diane: So can you still speak a little Portuguese?

Alma: I've lost it all. Yeah, I've lost it all.

Diane: So you were there for three months. And then what did you do?

Alma: Well, and then we came back, and then we decided the next year, what do you say? Well, well, we went from January till March. So we were there for Mardi Gras. And then the next year, we decided, well, we ought to do something for winter. So we took a trip around the world. Wow. And we went with an outfit called Semester at Sea. And it's about 350 college students that take their last semester at college, and they take about 50 adult passengers. So we went on that tour around the world.

Diane: I've never heard of that. I'm intrigued.

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Alma: It was very interesting. We took all the classes that they take classes every day. We took special classes and then they traveled around each world. Each group had meetings all over the world to visit different factories or historical places, but all to do with the education. And then they had to take final exams. But we didn't.

Diane: But you went to all the meetings?

Alma: We went to a lot of them, yeah. The ones that we were interested in, we just audited the classes. They had classes every day. But you didn't have to, were you expected to attend? No, we were just adult passengers. Not we didn't take care of them, we didn't have anything to do with them. But we were allowed to go on the trip with them. And it was great traveling with the young people because with their young ideas. It was the time they were having so much anxiety in South Africa. Apartheid was was in full swing. And that was a very interesting place to do to be there in 19 1984. What did you learn? on that trip? We learned how the rest of the people live in the world, and how how the education system is more important, but so important to some of these countries that have nothing. And how did they, how did they rise above it? And how did they survive?

Diane: Do you know if it's still going on this program?

Alma: Oh, yeah, I got I got a notice last week they're taking a, they go twice a year. And we went from Fort Lauderdale to Brazil, and then around South Africa, and then through India, Sri Lanka, China, Japan, and across the Pacific. That was a long trip back. But that was that was 90 days.

Diane: Wow. That's a big commitment.

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Alma: Yeah.

Alma: What they do is when we left Fort Lauderdale, there was an expert on Brazil who boarded and an expert on anthropology of Brazil and the language. So we studied for three or five days to get to Brazil studied Brazilian, and learned something when you got that and then when we left Brazil, those people flew back to New York and we took on people who were experts of South Africa, which was our next stop and and then all the way around the world you would put on the experts and drop them off. So that you always had the expert advice along the way.

Diane: And they fed you on the ship, but you got to go off and were they guided tours everywhere you went?

Alma: Oh, like for instance, in Madras, we went to a Lever Brothers factory and they showed us how they develop the soaps and things and just for the businessman just taking a tour of it and then we went to a salt mine that was, you know, just different things that were some of them were we went to, often times we went to a university so that the students could interact with the students of different universities, things like that.

Diane: And did you also interact with the students? Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Diane: Did you ever want to go back and visit any of the countries?

Alma: Oh we did go back. We took three tours three trips around the world.

Diane: What a wonderful experience both for the young college students and for the older people who are on board. What was the most shocking thing you learned, do you think, in any of these voyages?

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Alma: I think I didn't realize how poor the world is. The world is very, very poor, and I mean, how does a girl from Westbrook, Maine find out how poor, I mean how destitute people are?

Diane: Did you ever have an opportunity to do any volunteer work anywhere?

Alma: Oh, I did always volunteered in Arizona, in Arizona, mostly I volunteered. And I volunteered in the daycare center, senior daycare center for senior live, a couple would leave the husband or the wife off and go off.

Diane: But not in any other countries?

Alma: Not any other that was the only one when did was Brazil because it was so finite, the particular expertise they needed. And the owner of the mill, of the of the company that he worked for had a 12 year old son who was anxious to learn English. So Eduardo, when I would take a walk and he would teach me Portuguese and I would teach him English.

Diane: How long ago did you take the last trip?

Alma: 2000. And Joe was 90 years old then.

Diane: So Joe was a little bit older than you? Fourteen years older. Yeah. At what point did you move out to Arizona?

Alma: After Joe retired, we just retired to Arizona, and we had an RV. So we traveled the United States.

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Diane: I was just gonna ask you. Did you go cross country in the RV?

Alma: All, every state, every state.

Diane: Every single state. You two loved an adventure didn't you?

Alma: And we took we took a group of RVers to New Zealand, Flew to New Zealand and rented RVs there. And I think they were 28 and our group, 28 rigs.

Diane: Are you telling me that you two took a took a group or you were part of a group?

Alma: Oh, well, more or less? Both? Both. We, my husband happened to be president of the travel trailer club at that time. It had like 500 members. So we used to take, set up trips.

Diane: Okay, so let me just I want to make sure I get the chronology right. Joe retires from doing research. He did a consultancy for a while. But you sold the house in Westbrook and you retired in Arizona, in Sun City in Sun City, Arizona, which is outside of Phoenix. And that was your home base. Yeah. Retirement didn't mean to you what it means to some people. Retirement, it seems, meant to you that you really opened up your mind to all kinds of adventures and learning new things and doing things.

Alma: Why not? Why not?

Diane: I think it sounds very exciting. And now that you are 96? 96. You've lived here in Maine, you came back to Maine, how long ago?

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Alma: Seven years.

Diane: How long did you get to live out in Arizona?

Alma: 35 years.

Diane: That's a long time. And then did Joe get sick?

Alma: Yeah. Well, he, he had a stroke. And it was in he was in the care center for a year. And that was 2001 he died.

Diane: And how old was he at that time?

Alma: 91.

Diane: And were you prepared for that? Can you be prepared for that? Even though, you know.

Alma: I was prepared for that since I was married. Why? Well, he was so much older. I figured he you know he was going to go and I was going to be left.

Diane: Well, how do you prepare for something like that?

Alma: You just expect it when it arrives.

Diane: Doesn't make it hurt any less, probably?

Alma: No, no, it's just a fact.

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Diane: Would you consider yourself a very practical, pragmatic kind of individual?

Alma: Very much so.

Diane: So sentiment doesn't rise to the top as much as practicality does.

Alma: Oh, I've got sentiment, but I use my head.

Diane: How did your life change after Joe died?

Alma: It stayed pretty much the same in Arizona because I had the same people. It changed when I came back to Maine because I was limited to what I could do. And now I'm limited because I can't drive. Oh, don't you hate that. That's a killer.

Diane: So you had a strong support system in Arizona and then came the day when you just realized that you needed to move.

Alma: I needed to plan ahead. I was in good shape. I was 89. 88, 89. I turned 90 when I was here. So I was going to begin to need help, but I was out there by myself.

Diane: So you didn't need help yet at 89. Right? But what were you expecting you're going to need help with?

Alma: I didn't know. I didn't know. But I talking to people out there, I knew that it was time for me to be near someone when I did need help. And my daughter happens to be an attorney, and which was one of the reasons I came here. She's She's very capable.

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Diane: Some people just let things happen, and they, you know, suddenly there's a crisis. You didn't want to be in the crisis situation. You wanted to be all but already established? Right? Must have been hard, though. After 35 years to say goodbye to Arizona and say goodbye to your friends.

Alma: Yeah. Well, if it's hard, it's hard. You just do it.

Diane: I've heard that so many times from people I've interviewed. I've interviewed a lot of people who are in there. 90s now and a lot of them said it is what it is, you make the best of it.

Alma: Well, that that's kind of defeatist if you're going to say it is what it is but some things you cannot change. You can't change death. It's coming.

Diane: But you can change how you live the life you have, correct?

Alma: One day at a time.

Diane: So tell me what it is for you. At 96 when you wake up every morning, you happy to be alive?

Alma: I'm tired of it. I've done it. I've done it. I'm tired of it. There's a group that meets for coffee in the morning about eight people out in the group. And I make myself go every morning because that means I have to get up, I have to get dressed, I have to look decent. I have to see people and talk to them. And I'm ready for the day. So at least I haven't sitting here in my PJs all morning.

Diane: Because you could do that?

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Alma: Yeah.

Diane: That's not like you when you were younger?

Alma: No, no.

Diane: At what age do you think that started happening to you? Or did it start happening to you when you moved in here?

Alma: When I moved here. Yeah.

Diane: Would you say that you're depressed?

Alma: No

Diane: Just ready?

Alma: I'm ready. I've been ready. For how long? Three, four years, three, four years.

Diane: How do you know when you're ready?

Alma: Well, I've done everything that I wanted to do. I there's nothing I want to do that's left over. I've been every place I've seen everybody and done what I want to. There's there's no challenges.

Diane: The challenge is to get up and get dressed.

Alma: Yeah. Yeah, but that's a big challenge.

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Diane: You ever lonely?

Alma: Not really, not really. When I am I go up, fortunately, one of the good things about living in the lodge instead of living in a cottage is when I'm lonely. I just walk down the hall and there's somebody there.

Diane: You know, I forgot that we were in the lodge because I was looking out and thinking that this is one of the cottages. This is a really nice apartment.

Alma: Thank you. Yeah, it is a nice apartment. Yeah, but I walk twice a day, all the way, a mile just about a mile. But I meet people along the way, and then that just turns it over.

Alma: When I walk down the hall. I know everybody and they know me. Yeah. Maybe a few new people, I don't know. But mostly everybody I know.

Diane: So there are some older people who will isolate themselves, but you do not do that?

Alma: Purposely. On purpose.

Diane: So by saying that, you're an extrovert, you make friends easily, but still, you can feel it inside of you that if you weren't on top of it, you might isolate yourself in here?

Alma: It would be easy. It would be easy. Yeah.

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Diane: So that gives me a little bit of insight into some other people who do do that. So you have some kind of reserve, I guess.

Alma: I don't think it's good to just stay by that's why I got to Alice. Alice I wanted her to take me out one day a week at least that's where we started just to get out of here and go get in the car and go someplace out to lunch, out for a ride. And that's what we do mostly go different places. And, and she's very entertaining and very delightful to me. And she's very, very, very, very thoughtful and caring and just fortunate to have her she does so much for me.

Diane: I think that how you lived your life, all your life dictates how you end your life. If you are a person who is outgoing and curious and always wanting to learn new things, that's not going to change, I don't think, when you're 90. I mean, even though you say that it would be easy to isolate yourself, you're still curious, you still get out and do things you take care of yourself. So that's maybe just what's inside of you. That's your makeup.

Alma: But there are too many people are just closing the door and staying in their own apartment.

Diane: Do you think that's a push or a pull thing? You know, do you think that that's because that's just who they are? Or is it because there's nobody that's reaching out to them?

Alma: Well, you have to reach out yourself too.

Diane: I was recently at a conference, it was an aging conference, and we were having a discussion afterwards.

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Diane: One of the things I've learned is a lot of people I've interviewed who live in assisted living places, they have lots of people around them and they have lots of activities, but they missed their kids. Because the general consensus was that once the kids know you're safe in a place, they feel like they don't have to, you know. Yeah. And so we were talking about, well, how can we make the kids understand? And one of the ladies said, we have to tell them, because sometimes we don't, we don't let our kids know, hey, I'm lonely. I'd like to see you. Because we don't want to bother them. We don't want to be a burden. But one lady, another lady got up and she said, Well, you know, I, I did tell my son recently when he took me to one of the kids games, and when we were going home, I said, I loved that so much. I wish I could do it more often. I wish I could see you more often. And he said to her, Well, I didn't realize that. Let's have a date. Once a week we'll all get together for dinner and she just she said If I hadn't said anything he would never have known. So like you said, sometimes we just have to tell them that.

Alma: I think that's the mother in you. What? To? Protect them, not to burden them and not to upset them.

Diane: So you might keep your troubles or your anxieties or your sadness, anything to yourself?

Alma: Yeah, they want to hear the good things, but they don't really want to hear the bad things. Everything's fine. Everything's fine, is what they really want to hear.

Diane: So if you were telling them how you really felt, what might you say?

Alma: And that's a part of vanity, too.

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Diane: What do you mean?

Alma: Well, you want to feel as if you're self sufficient. You don't need to get help from them. My daughter says that's the reason I'm not dying. I can't get to heaven. I have to be humble before I go and I'm not humble enough.

Diane: That's like Ben Franklin. I remember reading someplace. He said, I have only one. One flaw in my character. I lack humility.

Alma: Personified.

Diane: Do you think people treat you any differently now that you're 96?

Alma: I don't tell them.

Diane: But they know that you're not 60 any more.

Alma: I think they guessed that.

Diane: I don't think they'd guess that you were 96 though, you don't look, I'm stereotyping but you do not look 96 you do not act 96.

Diane: You're in good physical shape.

Alma: Yeah.

Alma: I have a problem I have kidney problem. And it's incipient, but not bothersome, it's just there. So I have to watch potassium. Don't need

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anything with potatoes in it, don't eat bananas, don't eat peaches, don't eat cantaloupe, orange juice, you know. But that's that's the only thing that restricts my diet is the fact that the potassium should be controlled not not eliminated but controlled.

Diane: Your eyes are fine. Your ears are fine. Yeah. What? You have a good sense of humor. Are you still learning new things?

Alma: Hopefully. Yes, hopefully. Yeah.

Diane: What do you wish you could do now that you can't?

Alma: I like to play golf. I played a lot of golf. Yeah, I miss my golf.

Diane: What makes it a good day for you?

Alma: Okay. One of the things that makes it a good day I like to play bridge. I had been playing three days a week but now I play one day. I like to play poker. I like to go to lectures. I like to go to all the plays in Portland. I go to the symphony, I go to the Good Theater. I go to the Lyric Theater. I go to Portland players. There's another one I forget what it is. Portland Stage? Portland Stage. Yeah. And I take the van, so I go to all the plays. And I enjoy doing that. That's fun.

Diane: That's awesome. I'm glad I asked you that question.

Diane: When did you stop driving?

Alma: When I got Alice two years ago.

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Diane: So you were driving up until that point and what made you stop?

Alma: I thought it was time.

Diane: So nobody came to you and said, Mom, we're taking the keys away?

Alma: No, and it wasn't. It wasn't that anything happened. I just I just said this is the time to stop. Like I said I was gonna it's time to move here. It's time to stop. There's a time to live and a time to die.

Diane: Was hard to give up your car though?

Alma: Killed me. We still use my car. I still have it. Alice drives it.

Diane: That's the part that I'm not looking forward to.

Alma: Oh, it's terrible. I mean, I wanted to get a birthday card. You know, you just can't get a birthday card. Got to wait until Alice comes. Thank God for Alice. Here's that humbling thing.

Diane: When we were having lunch together, you were talking about you don't let anybody tell you to do anything.

Alma: No, I really don't. I really haven't up until now.

Diane: And do you think it's going to happen more and more?

Alma: Is has to. It has to.

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Diane: You'll still be speaking your mind.

Alma: Quietly.

Diane: What would you like your legacy to be?

Alma: Oh, god. She made me happy.

Diane: I have to say you've made me happy today. I've enjoyed talking with you a great deal.

Alma: Thank you. Thank you.

Diane: You've been listening to *Conversations About Aging*, a Catching Health Podcast. I'm Diane Atwood and I've been talking with Alma Thomas.

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