

CONVERSTATIONS ABOUT AGING: JENNIFER FITZPATRICK, 71
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OPEN 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.

Life hasn't always been easy for today's guest, but she has to be one of the most optimistic individuals I've met. Now 71, she and her husband are both retired, and they are enjoying lots of adventures together, most of them right here in their beloved state of Maine.

Diane: I'm sitting here in Durham, Maine, in his fabulous old farmhouse with a woman that I feel like I've known almost forever. Jennifer Fitzpatrick.

Diane: I first met you back in the late 70s, maybe the early 80s we both worked in a building on High Street in Portland. I worked for the Public Interest Research Group. That's right. And you worked.

Jennifer: For the Intown Learning Center. That's right. I was at the Intown Learning Center up on the third floor with adult education.

Diane: And we were both in our 20s. And we're not anymore.

Jennifer: No, no.

Jennifer: That building now is the McAuley Residence building. Transitional housing for women that's sponsored by Mercy Hospital and they have added on a whole wing to that original building. It's a yellow brick building. You can't miss it on High Street when you look.

Diane: Well, so you and I first met way back when our paths crossed way back when we were in our 20s and we both happened to be working in the same building on High Street in Portland. But where did you start out in life?

Jennifer: I was born in Rockland, Maine and Knox County General Hospital in December. December 5, 1948. What's interesting about that building is it's now a nursing home and I thought, wouldn't it be ... but there's no chance of my going back there. I did have a family member who was in the nursing home for a while and I went to the nurse's station. And the nurse who was the longest term nurse there took me to what had been the maternity unit and showed me the one room at the time where I would have been born. It was really kind of funny, and I came home and told Michael all about it. He said, only you would ask. But that's where I was born. And my mom was pregnant with me when she was 16. And so I'm very fortunate to be here. And her marriage to my biological dad did not last and that's how we ended up living with my grandparents. And we had talked about living with them when I was young on the lighthouse on Owl's Head and that's how I ended up there. Is that the only lighthouse that you lived in? No, I've also lived at Fort Point Light in Stockton Springs because my stepdad was a keeper as well. He had been the keeper at Matinicus Rock where they did it's called a stag light, men only, couldn't take their families and he was also at Brown's Head but he was stationed at Fort Point and it was a family light and so that's where I lived, I was like, I must have been 12, 13 when I arrived there. Yeah, it was like special time. You know who is it says you know, you have friends when you're 12 and you'll never have those close friends like that again or some phrase like that. And I remember those kids from that area. I've even tried to find some of them online. You know how you go on Facebook but to no avail.

Diane: Well, I recently interviewed a gentleman, you know who he is Ernie DeRaps, who was in the Coast Guard and he manned some of those. He told me about the stag station. But I'm interested from a child's point of view. You were a kid who lived. What was that like?

Jennifer: It was great. We still go back, Michael and I go back. Michael is your husband. Michael is my husband of 41 years and we go back and I talked to him, it's like the memory tour. We go around and we walk around though, it's very, very different now it's a state park and back when I lived there, it wasn't.

Fort Point Light is on Cape Jellison in Stockton Springs and the Cape itself, it's kind of remote. It's still a land light, so you're not an island, but when we lived there, the road was one mile of dirt road down to the light from the main road on the Cape. And that's where the bus picked us up for school, picked us, picked me up. I was the only kid around.

Diane: You had to walk the mile?

Jennifer: Yeah, we didn't walk the mile. We had an old beat-up truck gosh that you know, a 1940 something truck called Old Faithful. And Old Faithful would take us up to take me up to the bus stop and back and but as a kid, it was like your playground. I mean, you had the ocean on two sides, you had a sandbar, had old remnants of an old fort, because Fort Pownal was there, and remnants of an old hotel, so we used to go digging for shards of you know, pottery and stuff in the old hotel. It had lots of little things we found from when the hotel burned and so that part was kind of exciting. What was even more exciting I think was my stepdad Bob Kinney was the keeper and he was a young man and he liked to do adventuresome things. I guess I could put it that way. He made it fun. He was fun to have as a dad. So like things like if we had a real storm or whatever he'd say oh, let's go sit out in the oak tree.

Diane: In the tree with the thunder and lightning?

Jennifer: Yes, waving with, you know. No, it's just like a big wind or hurricane or whatever and we've done that before. You know, we'd sit in the tree and just let the wind take us away and laugh about it. But he always took me up in the tower when he went up to you know, turn the light. You had to put the light on a half-hour before sunset and you had to take it off a half-hour before after daybreak. But he would take me up and the only time I really wasn't allowed in the tower was when they came to do inspections because that was the bigwigs from Boston would come up and you know, and what I learned later, is that your pay was dependent on how well the inspections were. So they kept you out of sight? They kept me out of sight, as they did by my three siblings. So, but we had fun as kids, we made a lot of friends and so you had to

make your own fun, had to make your own fun and so when I would bring friends out and we would, you know, just go play, there was no such thing as playing inside unless it was really bad weather and we played games, but we played outside all the time. So there was a lot of swimming that went on and skipping rocks down on the sandbar because that's where the Penobscot River just makes it makes a right turn right in front of us.

Diane: I remember as a kid, I used to think of, if you lived in a lighthouse, then you lived in that circular tower. But you don't. It's a house attached.

Jennifer: Yeah, well Fort Point isn't circular. Fort Point is square. It's a square tower. You look at it, it's a square tower but it still has a circular staircase. Inside the square tower? Inside the square tower. It's pretty cool. And the kids, of course, any of my friends from school wanted to come and, you know, go in the tower. We wanted to go outside where the rim is but that was not allowed.

Diane: Kind of dangerous.

Jennifer: Little bit and then you could see the cliffs you know, it's perched on cliffs. I don't have a picture of what it looks like from the river, but it is a high and how they ever had kids on that light is beyond me, but now it's fenced off. I don't remember it ever being fenced when we were there. It might have been but I don't recall that.

Diane: And now it's not, it's still working but it's all automated or?

Jennifer: There's a keeper there, Terry Cole is the keeper there that takes care of the light. And everything is automated, as you say, but he takes care of it because it's a state park and they have visitors that come down and.

Diane: Like you and your husband Michael, you go and visit and chat?

Jennifer: What was really funny is we went for years and years we went, and about five years ago we went. It was a blustery day. It was beautiful. We were walking down to the bell tower and I saw this guy, you know, hovering around and driving around on the back 40 and you know, just I just kind of ignored him. We were just walking around because you can walk on the grounds you know, you just stay away from the personal quarters, the house. And it was so blustery and there was a shingle that had blown loose from the house and the shingles in this particular station are red. A lot of them in Maine, you'll notice the roofs are red and they're red shingles. So I leaned down and I picked up this shingle and I asked Michael to carry it. I wanted to take it home, because as I told you earlier, I do collect things. So as I picked it up, this voice behind me says I'll take that and I said no, you won't. And it was Terry Cole. It was the first time I met him in person and I said no I'm taking it home as a memento and he said no, no, no. And I said, so I introduced myself who I was, and at that point, he said, let's go up in the tower. I had never been in since we had left and so it was pretty kind of nicest. It was just pretty overwhelming. Of course I cried. And he was apologetic because it didn't look as good as he wanted it to look. The nice thing about the tower is you know, they talk about that tower that they put at Fort Knox, the one that goes, I don't know if you've been up in the one on the bridge. I know where you mean. Do it sometime, it's worth it. But you know, it's a fabulous view and so when you get in the lighthouse and is still a fabulous view up and down the river.

Diane: So were the quarters the same?

Jennifer: We didn't go into the house. We just went into the tower but I always remember my dad doing the log at night he would sit in the in the keepers office.

Diane: When you were up there, you got to go up in the tower, you didn't go into the house, but you said it brought a flood of memories back?

Jennifer: Oh, it really did. It really did. It was a different era. And I just remember my dad sitting in his office and working on the logs. And the logs

were like, just the diary of what happened every day. You know what time the sun came up and what time he lit the lamp and how the weather was and who had come by and back in the day when people drove down to the light, we stopped whatever we were doing, and took them up. And we took people up to the light all the time and it was always open. We never worried about them falling down the stairs. We never worried about the liability issue. But it was more that they were welcome. It was the people's house, and it was really it was kind of fun to do that. And as kids and mom and dad were busy. We would take people up.

Diane: Kids would just go up the winding staircase?

Jennifer: Oh yeah. So we would just take, we would go up. Now I'm the oldest of four of us. And I have a sister who's five years younger, a sister who was um, we were just trying to figure this out the other day. I think she's eight years younger. And, my, no, she's nine years younger and my brother is eight years younger.

Diane: So your mom had you? You told me your mom had you at 16 and that marriage didn't last and then she remarried and that's when all your siblings came along?

Jennifer: Well, not quite.

Jennifer: My step dad came on as the third husband. And he was I must have been about seven. I think it was about seven. He was stationed in the Coast Guard in Rockland.

Jennifer: We had lots of friends in the Coast Guard that, there's something about the service where they take care of each other. It's a very family oriented headset where everybody, it doesn't matter if you're just meeting the person for the first time, if you're in the Coast Guard or if you're in the Navy, or if you're in the Army, it's all like that. It's a very family oriented-thing and very accepting. So we had a lot of friends that were stationed in Rockland and

then they went off to different places and they all went to different lighthouses or they all went to different, sometimes different states, but we always stayed right here. We were in Maine.

Diane: I can I can relate to the service because my dad was a career Army man, and we moved every two or three years.

Jennifer: Yeah, I mean, that's what we were. We sort of felt like transients, because every couple of years as you say, we were going off somewhere else. It was all within Maine but I went to like nine different schools in 12 years. So what it teaches you is how to make new friends, how to be accepting, how to get over that fear of fitting in, and just jump in to things so I think it was kind of a character building.

Diane: It's definitely a character building life. Yes, you have to be very, very adaptable to new situations or you're not going to make it.

Jennifer: Yeah, absolutely. My husband Michael refers to me as being resilient.

Jennifer: And I think over the years, yeah, I guess that could be. You have to be, you have to be. Yeah, when I was a younger woman, I was leaving an unhappy marriage with two small children striking out on my own with a part time job at the University that turned into full time thankfully, where I get paid \$100 a week. And you were single parent? Single mom, yeah, and I was on food stamps only they didn't call them food stamps because it wasn't food stamps. It was government food surplus. So you got those little boxes, the boxes of cheese? Boxes of cheese and the pork in the can and the peanut butter and the evaporated milk and the powdered milk. Oh, gosh, that stuff was terrible.

Diane: So I want to make sure I have a timeline right. So you have two small kids, you're a single parent. Are we talking about the 70s, late 70s?

Jennifer: Yes, we are talking about the 70s, yeah.

Diane: And when did you and Michael get married?

Jennifer: Oh, well, let's see, we've been married for 41 years. We lived together for a little while before that. So that was in 1978 we got married. We got married in Little Falls Baptist Church, which is out by where you live. That's, that's an interesting story because Michael had been married before and there was not an annulment in place, so we couldn't get married in the Catholic Church, and I'm Baptist and he's Catholic. So we were doomed to get married anywhere. Now Reverend Ralph Paradis from The Little Falls Baptist Church, I had a conversation with Reverend Paradis and he said he was willing to do it even though we were of different faiths. He was willing to, to do our marriage and so we had a little ceremony there about 100 of our friends and family came. And we had Paula and Jeffrey, who were there, my children, as part of our ceremony, so we became a family.

Jennifer: My brother walked me down the aisle in full Coast Guard regalia.

Jennifer: Every summer we have been in the last few years, having Michael's side of the family all come and they rent cottages at Higgins Beach. We all rent different cottages and spend a week together because he has a sister in California and a sister in Texas and a sister in Massachusetts. And we all get together the families, our kids, and the grandkids and everybody and rent places, his brother lives in Windham, so is pretty close. But we all get together and I thought, well, we're all getting together this summer. Let's do a vow renewal. Because Michael's sister is a UCC minister. And so I contacted Beth and asked her if she would do a service for us at her cottage because we all have different cottages and so we did and I did it was wonderful because Maggie and Molly my two grandchildren, Sean and Jenna's kids took part of it. They went and picked some Queen Anne's lace, so I could hold some Queen Anne's lace, and they had a little candle for me to light. And we renewed our vows on the lawn right by Higgins Beach. That's a lovely story. It was

wonderful. And then we had a water balloon battle, which is great. So we had all the family, which was really kind of fun.

Jennifer: We do a lot. Michael and I since he's retired, he retired about four years ago I think, I kind of lost track, we've kind of set our goal because for so many years, he worked in DC and he wasn't here four days out of the week. So we weren't together for a long time. We've made it our goal to spend as much time as possible now. And so the other thing is that we always want to do something fun, once a week doesn't matter, you know, if it's just a simple walk, or if we want to go to a movie or, or go out to eat, it has to be something fun that was just focused on each other for at least once a week, because we get wrapped up doing our own thing and this house requires a lot of work.

Diane: Let's go back. Let's go back a ways. All right. You and Michael got married. You had two young children at the time? You had a son together? All those kids are now grown up and it and you have grandchildren now you have grandchildren out on the west coast. You have grandchildren here in Maine. How have the grandchildren enriched your life?

Jennifer: Oh, there's I told one of my friends you cannot believe the difference it makes it. I don't know what it is but it's just so special to see these kids grow and to see just the little tiny things that they do. I don't remember being as engrossed with my children when they were little as I am with these kids, they could they could sneeze and I'd say oh, what a beautiful little sneeze. You know, it is it's just watching them grow.

Jennifer: I just when they say I love you Grammy it's like oh.

Diane: It's really unconditional love. I think we're raising our kids. we're so busy. Yeah. And it gives you that opportunity to sit back and notice and you don't have to take care of the day to day usually.

Jennifer: That's it, that's it. I don't have to deal with all the other issues and I'm and I'm not working so it's you know, it's wonderful. I can devote all the time necessary to them and we have fun.

Diane: So they know that coming to see Grammy in particular is going to be fun?

Jennifer: It'll be fun. We'll be doing something different. With grandpa it's be going out and getting you know eggs from the hens because we have a flock of hens out back. It was raining when you came so we didn't get a chance to walk out and see the hens but we have hens and they help Grandpa with his yard work.

Jennifer: But it's just it's amazing to have these two here and then when the other kids come, they came last July 4 of July from the west coast, it was wonderful just having, having well, having Donovan, he was great to try to foster connectedness because they won't have other cousins. That's right. So they're going to have to have to be close. You know, I'm really, really, really close to my cousins and Michael's getting closer now as his cousins as they age then he was with, you know, through our working years. He's building that relationship again. And they have a big reunion this summer. We had a big reunion here a couple of years ago. So I want those grandchildren to know their family that wherever they travel, they have to know who their family is so.

Diane: So that's important to you.

Jennifer: Oh, family's like, yeah, families and very, very important to me.

Jennifer: I'm the eldest of all the grandchildren. ok, of all the cousins, I'm the next in line. Okay, all the rest have passed on.

Diane: Okay, so you are the generation. You're the matriarch in a way.

Jennifer: Oh, gosh, help me, yeah. So, as part of my role to do that, I decided that we needed to have a cousins gathering. And so, a couple of years ago, we had everybody here at our house. I counted the cousins and I think I have over 20 cousins, and their families that could come, came, and it was really wonderful. And they, all the seven Haskins' kids were represented, except for one, my uncle Merrill's kids couldn't make it but it was absolutely phenomenal, just having them here. This summer, Michael's Fraser side had the gathering at one of the Fraser's houses up on little Sebago and it was the same thing. They all came, they hadn't seen each other for years. It was the same thing. So I want my grandchildren to know. They have cousins. And those cousins are important.

Diane: How does it feel, though, to realize that now you're you represent the next generation?

Jennifer: It's a little daunting. It's a little daunting because back many years ago, I didn't believe I would live beyond the age of 39. Why? Because my mother died in a car accident and she was one month away from her 40th birthday. So I had no concept of what life could be and I thought, well, maybe, maybe it's not going to be for me, so I never really thought I was going to live very long. Now I talk about living longer than I expected and I'm finding out I'm the oldest, which you know, it never really settled in until my aunt died about four years ago. And she was the youngest of that generation, and I thought oh, that makes me next in line, which was kind of funny to think about. So I intend to live as long as my Grammy Rena, if not longer, and she lived to be 92.

Diane: She was really a tough one. She's a tough one.

Diane: So can we talk about your mom? Oh, sure. What happened and you were in by then you were in your 20s?

Jennifer: I was pregnant with Jeffrey. So that was 47 years ago and by then she and dad were living in, because he got transferred, they were living in Kentucky.

Jennifer: And he was working, I think he was still the Coast Guard then. He was working, guarding the river there and they had gone out to the county fair. And some kid coming back from, this is 1972, some kid coming back from Vietnam, who was celebrating having survived Vietnam, was very, very drunk and decided to pass the long line of cars he was behind and head on to my folks. Yeah, so she, yeah, it was sad. She, it was so sudden just shocked us all. So my dad was a young man he was younger than my mom by two years. And so he was like, only 14 years older than I am, you know. So it's kind of tough looking back and thinking he had to start all over again with a new family. So we lost my mom, and my youngest sister and my youngest brother, my dad put them in Glen Cove Christian Academy. It's a boarding school because he was in the service and he couldn't deal with it. And how old were they then? About 14, 15, yeah, and my other sister was living on her own at that point so yeah, it was, yeah, pretty rough time. It was pretty sudden, just sudden. So I immediately, course I look back at this and think how numb was this? I just dropped out of school. I didn't let anybody know. Your reaction to it was that you just dropped out of school? Yeah. I needed to go home. Yeah, but I just I just dropped out of school. I couldn't deal with any of the issues, couldn't deal with study, but I never thought to let anybody know what was going on. So it took a long time for me to get my GPA back up into a different strata. You were in shock. I was but I you know, I went back eventually, took me 10 years but I got my undergraduate degree.

Diane: Good for you.

Jennifer: Yeah. And so was my Master's but didn't finish that.

Diane: Well, you still have time now that you're going to live another 20 years.

Jennifer: No, I ran out of time. I had my masters work done except for two courses and the timeframe ran out.

Diane: I didn't know there was a time frame.

Jennifer: Neither did I. That's what happened. There was.

Diane: Well, I think you should fight it.

Jennifer: Nah, I'm not going to bother. What it's going to get me, you know, a master's in adult education Really?

Diane: Well, you can help lifelong learners.

Jennifer: I did. That's what I did.

Jennifer: I was the coordinator of Adult Basic Ed for the City of Portland for a brief amount of time before I went to Mercy. Yeah. Okay then. Yeah, so, and what happened is life get too busy. Once I went to Mercy, there was a whole different set of requirements.

Diane: So you went from education to a Catholic hospital? Yes. And you ran the volunteer program all that time?

Jennifer: All that time. Yeah. All that time. Yeah.

Jennifer: Yeah, I left I left a really nice working experience with adult education because during that era, the teachers for adult Ed were not unionized, even though they were part of the Portland Public School System they didn't have the same contract. So they worked year round. They didn't get all the holidays that the other teachers got. They the working conditions were just not good by comparison to the other teachers in the system, okay. Okay. So they wanted to unionize. And so I was management, but I liked what they were going to do, so I had to leave. And that's how I ended up at Mercy.

Diane: Well, okay, so you aren't just a worker bee you managed and so managers again, yeah, so managers have to pledge allegiance to not unionization, but just, okay.

Jennifer: So I was I was struggling with that. And the job came at the same time and so I was able to leave and I made a good leap and I and I loved my job. It was a wonderful job.

Diane: How many years did you work there?

Jennifer: I worked two months shy of 30.

Diane: That's a long time. You must have loved what you did.

Jennifer: I feel very fortunate that I that I worked at Mercy during a time when volunteers were appreciated. When volunteerism was very strong with, particularly a lot of women who were not working women at the time, this they were a lot of older women. It gave me a really strong foundation in terms of what to expect, as I grew older. Because I could look at some of these gals of the 70s and 80s. And what they were doing for me and get a perspective of what I'll be able to do later on. It was it was a great job. I had young people who are coming who are exploring careers. I have people who are changing careers that wanted to come in and do some exploration. I had the opportunity to develop courses for the university around volunteer management. Over time, a lot of those things were really so rewarding. I was the president of our state organization for four years, president of the New England Association for two years and had wonderful connections across the country because they're the friends that I had made and professional development. I worked to get the national certification exam.

Diane: I didn't know there was a certification exam.

Jennifer: Yeah, I hope this still is but yes, there is national certification.

Diane: When you first got there, and you told me you were raised in the Baptist Church. Oh, yeah. When you first got there did the nuns have all the prayer stalls still upstairs? Was the chapel upstairs still open, do you remember?

Jennifer: When I first got there, my office was on pediatrics, which was the second floor south and on the walls and all the wards they were like wards with four beds were painted like Big Bird, and, you know, the Cookie Monster and all these paintings on the wall. So my office was on pediatrics. I clearly remember the second floor. The second floor also had the Medical Library. It was right in the center. It was a beautiful, beautiful library, lot of mahogany and just made you just want to be there just to feel golden. It was just a wonderful spot. The Birthplace, which was just called maternity, was on the sixth floor. That's where everybody who says they were born in Mercy, usually, in the old days was born on the sixth floor. And the emergency department was on the basement level one right on the corner of State Street, that you'll see the side entrance. That was the emergency department.

Jennifer: The chapel was on the second floor.

Diane: It was a two-story chapel, wasn't it?

Jennifer Yes, it was because the balcony where the nuns would be up there and singing was on the third floor. It was Yeah, that happened. That changed during the first construction time that I was there. But that was just such a beautiful, beautiful spot. That was an amazing place. Yeah, that was such a wonderful spot. And now it's just a whole twisted around. There' are so many different changes that it's gone through.

Diane: And now you're retired. And loving it. Well, how long have you been retired? How long? I think it's I think I've been retired seven years maybe. Okay. I forgotten something that I. Eight years. Eight years that you've been retired? Yeah. Okay. And Michael four years. Yeah. Yeah. But there's a time in

your life that I know about that I think is important to talk about. You talked about your mom's accident. You had a horrific accident yourself. Yeah. Can you talk about that?

Jennifer: Boy, today is the anniversary actually of that accident, and it was 10 years ago today and I was on my way to work. It was just like any other day. Up early, I was always in the office by 7:30 and I was heading down the road and a mile it was it was a beautiful day actually, I remember getting up because it was the first snow and a mile from my house here, my car was struck by someone coming in the other direction and I was spun around and the next thing you know, I am being cut out of my vehicle. God bless the Subaru Forester, it saved my life, I think. And the rescue guys from town here were just fabulous.

Jennifer I was conscious through the whole thing.

Diane: Even immediately after because you said the next thing you knew you were being cut out.

Jennifer: Yeah, well, I was like spinning around. There was a woman who was on her way, because people stopped, you know, right off, a young man came in and he got my phone and I told him who to call, with my phone because I must have had a cell phone at that time. It was a flip phone, one of those old flip phones. Yup. And a woman who was on her way to work as a physical therapist in Auburn stopped, and she climbed into the car with me and held my head perfectly still while they were cutting me and trying to get me out, because she recognized that my neck was broken. Oh my god. And so yeah, pretty powerful.

Diane: You okay?

Diane: Here we are. I know it's your 10th anniversary, but still you, you have some PTSD there because of this, which would be understandable.

Jennifer: Um, in my life I have hit a moose. I've hit a moose and survived. I've had a big buck hit me and survive and then to have a car hit me. The thing that really struck me is Michael's mom also had died in a snowstorm car accident in coming to work, she actually worked for the nuns for 18 years at the Mother House and she was on her way to work when she died. And my mom had died in a car accident and I was not going to die. I was not doing that to my kids, I was not doing that to Michael. But this morning, I mentioned it to Michael I said I have upstairs and tonight a little ritual tonight. I have all the cards and all the support and tons and tons of letters. Oh my god, you wouldn't believe the letters and the notes from all over I have a basket that's like this, that's full of all this stuff that I haven't looked at. You've never looked at? Oh, I have looked at, I haven't looked at in the last four or five years. But tonight, we're looking through it. We're going to read them and then we're going to recycle them because we're trying to clean up some of this stuff around the house. But I thought to myself, what better way to do that than on the 10th anniversary of my new life.

Diane: Wow. But you thought in those moments that you might die?

Jennifer: Yeah, I did I absolutely did. I gave people instructions on telling my kids I love them.

Diane: How bad were your injuries?

Jennifer: Pretty awful. And actually, I mean, I didn't realize they were as bad as they were. I had a broken neck, a broken foot, broken ankle, broken humerus, there must have been something else. I don't recall. But what happened was when I get to the emergency when I get to the emergency department at Maine Med, you ever talked to Tony Owens? He was the doc on at that time in the emergency department. And I looked at him and I knew him from volunteering, from being the director volunteers at Mercy, and I looked up and I saw those beautiful blue eyes and he said, we're going to take care of you. Simple, we're going to take care of you. And then the surgeon who was going to address my neck was Dr. Wilson, neurosurgeon. And he came in and

got down close to me and said, I want you to wiggle your pinky for me. Because you might not be able to wiggle them tomorrow.

Diane: So he was worried because of your broken neck that you might become paralyzed?

Jennifer: Because apparently my spinal cord had edged out a little bit and they had to get it, they had to get it back realigned. Put it together. So but he said, we'll fix you up as best we can and that was it as best you can, as best you can. And so next thing I knew, oh, yeah, my hands. This is this is the only residual thing that I have with those two fingers that look like they're arthritic? Yeah, Yeah, bent. Yeah, they're definitely bent. But everybody was so wonderful. It just so happened that that Dr. Vaughn was in the building and he could take care of my hand. And there was another physician taking care of my ankle, and they were all working on me at the same time. And Dr. Ray White was fixing my humerus as best he could. And the long and the short of it is three years of physical therapy and I'm almost as good as new. I had lived all that time, my entire life and never been hospitalized. Never broken a bone, never been sick. I've only had three children. That was that was it. And then it was like everything hit at once. My head was in one of those funny little braces things. Whenever someone came in to look at me, they'd come in with a smile and then that smile would go to like a grimace, like, oh my god, look at you. So you mean your head was immobilized? Yeah, I was immobilized and the big sign behind me, you know not to touch my head, my neck.

Diane: So, needless to say they were able to inch your spinal cord back in place and you could wiggle your fingers the next day?

Jennifer: Dr. Wilson and I was not paralyzed that I'm actually fine. I have some, you know, I have pain. But I don't know whether that's because I'm 71 or whether it's because of the accident.

Jennifer: My neck is better than it was before. According to Dr. Wilson, my neck is stronger. I'm an inch taller. How can that be? They straightened me up.

Straightened me out, so I'm an inch taller. I thought when you get older, you're supposed to shrink, but no, I gained an inch. So now I'm five, four and a half.

Jennifer: But you know, this was one of the things that I think. I don't like to dwell on it, but it's always there because I always feel it. Every moment is so precious. And we sometimes just take it for granted. Just take for granted. And I find myself even now sometimes I'll snap around and say, wait a minute, this is important, too.

Diane: But you had some really tough lessons that got you to that point, didn't you? Resilience.

Jennifer: Yeah. That's why Michael said I was so resilient. I've been resilient about so many things, you know.

Diane: And so you survived that.

Jennifer: Yeah, and loving retirement. I'd like to go on adventures.

Diane: You told me that once a week you and Michael find something to do. Yeah. But I wonder, do you have a map here and so that you are you putting pins on a map because it seems like you're trying to visit every single spot in Maine.

Jennifer: We are both native Mainers and we love the state, and we just absolutely whenever there's an opportunity to see something new, we try to do it. A couple of weeks ago we just came back from the Katahdin Woods and Waters Monument and that was our second visit. We went up to the year it opened and it was our second visit and I thought we have to go back because we do this one day thing and I want to go back and stay overnight so we can do some I used to call a hiking now it's called walking.

Diane: I see you as being very active and very engaged.

Jennifer: Yeah, we still both have our health, pretty much. Michael has two new knees and now he can walk better than he could a few years back. And so we get out and we do a lot of dog walking and go on to different find different paths around town. The beauty of Maine now is that all of these towns are creating these walking paths. So we try to find as many we can. We love Harpswell for that. They have a lot of great places. If you've not been to Mitchell field, you should go. That's a nice place.

Jennifer So yeah, we try to do a lot and I think I think you need to be active. You need to keep your families close. Keep your friends close. I've been able to re establish some friendships with my best friend in high school. And my best friend from fourth grade, she and I are still good buddies, which is you know, and that's all important to us as we age. I think if we find it more important even.

Diane: You're on the younger, yeah, of the age spectrum of the getting older spectrum. All right? But for me, it's the older end because I was going to make it this far.

Diane: Are you doing anything to plan for when you hit 90 and 100 now that you know you're going to live that long?

Jennifer: Well, I bought a cemetery plot.

Diane: So it's good to plan.

Jennifer: It's good to plan. We've been doing what we call our adult list, you know, things like that and getting all the everything lined up so we don't leave that stuff for kids to have to deal with.

Diane: So what are some of the things besides getting your plots?

Jennifer: We've got all of our insurance policies all done, the wills are all done, the power of attorney and all of that stuff is all done. I've organized

boxes for the kids with their names on them so they'll know what's theirs when they start to throw stuff out.

Diane: Like pictures or mementos that.

Jennifer: Just specific to them, specific to them.

Diane: You and Michael plan to stay here? Do you have a plan for the future or a what if plan?

Jennifer: Not yet. Not yet.

Jennifer: It's more like what if we can't climb the stairs anymore?

Diane: Do you have a room that can turn into your bedroom downstairs?

Jennifer: Michael will have to give up his den, yes. Or I can give up the dining room. That's where I spent my rehab is in the dining room on the bed looking at chandelier. But it was like, we could we could adjust the house.

Jennifer: But I guess it's something we'll have to face, but I'm not ready to face it yet. Every now and then we talk about it. But it's not serious talk yet. It's more like, oh, what if?

Jennifer: My step grandfather was I think it was 94 and my step grandma was 92. But he always said about his wife at the end of her life. She was all used up. That's the phrase he used all used up she didn't have anything else that she was ready to go meet God and because they were very religious. So that made it easy for her to be that way. But that's why he referred to her as being all your stuff and I want to do you reach a point where this no more curiosity and no more interest or no more things that have to be done. Do you reach that point in life at some point? I can't imagine it right now. It's, you know, my age.

Diane: After having had so many conversations, I hear but I hear more about people who continue to be curious about things, but I do hear about loneliness. I do hear about people missing the things they used to enjoy doing. And it's made me really think hard about how I want to live my life every day. Because just as you said, you never know, we don't know, at any age, what's going to happen. But we do know when we hit our 70s and 80s that the end is nearer.

Jennifer: Well, yeah, the distance from here to there is a little shorter than it is to when you were a kid. Yeah, yes, you have to face some of those things, do the adult list, prepare that, get things set. And just, you know, forge on.

Diane: So what's your next excursion?

Jennifer: Well, I have to go to the eye doctor.

Diane: No, I said excursion.

Jennifer: This is the week I did all my, my adult stuff. I had my physical my annual wellness visit and all of that going to the eye doctor, we get the dog's nails trimmed, Michael's off getting his beard done. And this is the week we do the stuff that needs to be done. So we don't know, we haven't talked yet today. But what's our next event? You just kind of fell in the middle of our workweek.

Diane: Uh, well, I'm not part of your fun week. I'm part of your workweek. Well, all right. I'll have to deal with that.

Diane: One last question, that even though you haven't reached the ripe old age of 100 and something, you still have been around long enough to have some wisdom. So, would you like to end our conversation with some wisdom?

Jennifer: Wisdom?

Diane: Something somebody has taught you maybe.

Jennifer: Love one another. That would be it. Love one another.

Diane: And on that note ...

Diane: You've been listening to *Conversations About Aging*, a Catching Health Podcast. I'm Diane Atwood and I've been talking with Jennifer Fitzpatrick, a young, energetic, and enthusiastic 71-year-old.

If you enjoyed my conversation with Jennifer, please share it with a friend. You'll find more episodes on my blog Catching Health at CatchingHealth.com.

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