

Catching Health Podcast

A conversation about aging with Liz Johnson

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Diane: Welcome to the *Catching Health* podcast. I'm your host, Diane Atwood, and today I'm having a conversation about aging with Elizabeth, also known as Liz Johnson from Portland, Maine. So, could you guess her age from the sound of her voice at the beginning of this episode? I'd be surprised if you could. She's 93. And has more energy than many people at least 20 years younger. Would you believe that just a few years ago she was in a tap-dancing class? She took her final bow in June of 2019. No matter what your age is, you are bound to be inspired by this woman. I was, and I so enjoyed our conversation. I hope you will too. Meet Liz Johnson.

Diane: Hello, how are you today?

Elizabeth: I'm fine. So far so good, that's what I say every day.

Diane: Do you wake up and say, all right, here I am again?

Elizabeth: Right, right here I am. It's time for the stretching and I do about 10 stretches, different stretchings before I get out of bed.

Diane: Oh gosh. Good for you. That's more than I do. I might stretch like a cat, then the end.

Elizabeth: Yeah, I start with my toes curling those and then the ankle things and the knee things and the thigh things and the abs. And I even roll my eyes around the ceiling. During the day I'll do countertop pushups and then when I'm sitting watching TV at night, lots of times I'll just feel like getting on the floor and doing crunches and twists, back twists, you know, when the head's one way the knees the other way. Do you have you have an exercise gym that you go to or anything?

Diane: I did have a gym, but now we are actually doing it on Zoom.

Elizabeth: Right, right. I'm doing my yoga class from Woodfords church I do online.

Diane: Oh, I think that it's so wonderful that it's available to us.

Elizabeth: Oh, I do too. There's so much online. Even the magic of Christmas.

Diane: Seriously? Yes. I didn't know that.

Elizabeth: Yeah. just call PortTIX. 842-0800, I think, and you can sign up and then give them your email and a little money, whatever you want to, and you can watch it whenever you want to.

Diane: That's wonderful.

Elizabeth: I know. I haven't done it yet. I'm waiting for a good couple of hours with nothing else to do. You can do zooming whenever you want. That's a good thing about OLLI classes and the Sage lecture series. It was getting to be a real chore for me to get down there and parked and everything and into the auditorium by 9-30, but this way I can listen to the lectures in my jammies if I want to. And they have special interest groups. I'm in After Hours. Was. Three to five on Wednesday afternoons and we'd play bridge, and now I play bridge Friday afternoons with some of those people. There are two tables of us, and we do it on Trickster cards and we can see each other and talk and hear each other, but Trickster deals the cards keeps the scores and that kind of thing. And it's been wonderful for me. It's wonderful for everybody, but I'm thinking of myself because of my age. I don't have a lot of contact with younger people except for my family, which I just adore, getting together. My son and his wife own this house now and live upstairs. So, I see them pretty often and because they're there, I see my little great granddaughters. They are nine, six and four. So anyway, this way I keep in touch with younger people and course, you have to be 50 at least to join OLLI so there's somewhere in between.

Diane: Right. But when you're 93, younger takes on a different meaning. Doesn't it?

Elizabeth: 80, 80, is younger. I never thought of aging or wanting to live to be this age. I never gave it a second thought. I just one day at a time and here I am, how did I get here? Well, we're going to talk about that. I hope. So, you have questions?

Diane: I'm really excited about finding out what is it like to be 93 years old because I have a goal to live as long as I possibly can. I used to have a number on it, but I eliminated the number. I said, I just want to live as long as I can and live a good life.

Elizabeth: Isn't that interesting. I never had a goal like that. I never wanted it to be old. I never thought about the end of my life until probably 10 years ago. I started making arrangements and I just finished my end of life plans and showed them to my kids it's in my DNA, I think, because my father's father lived to be 95 and my two grandmothers were in their mid-eighties. My father had a sister who lived to be 104. Wow. And she was fine mentally and physically until she fell and broke her hip, which nowadays, they say when you're that old, the hip breaks and then you fall, and you get pneumonia in the hospital. And I'm sure that she said, let me go. Or I would have at that point at 104, I would have said, that's enough.

Diane: I think I would too, because you could still be sharp but there's so much loss at 104.

Elizabeth: That's it. I've lost so many friends and, you know, when you're young and you're couples and you're having dinner parties and you're drinking, you're having all this fun. You never think it's going to end. And all the men are gone and some of the women, um, we still, we have this birthday group and we're all right around 90, I'm the oldest. And, we all have our marbles. We get together for each one's birthday out to lunch. Course we're not doing that now, but I did have, a virtual party over across the street. I live across the street from a church and there's a big parking lot. So, I said, come on over and we'll circle the wagons and talk from our car windows. Well, as it turned out, everybody got out of their cars. It was a nice day and we still stayed pretty far apart. We had masks and we just had a nice visit and I served V8 juice and individual bags of Cheez-its or something like that.

Diane: Usually I go back in time first, but I like where the conversation is going so I'd like to learn a little bit more about how you are handling this COVID situation.

Elizabeth: I thank God for the telephone, the television and the iPad. And I guess I'm a homebody at heart because I'm not minding it. I go get my own groceries and I have a

couple of friends who can't drive anymore, so I help them out occasionally. And, I read a lot. I love to read. And as I say, yoga online and bridge online and what else, there's so much available and I'm not minding it, I'm not lonely, cause I have my son and his wife upstairs and my daughter-in-law's sister and her husband live in the apartment on the side of the house and so I don't feel alone and I love to cook and try new recipes. That's what I started doing the most of when this first started, I said, gee, what can I cook, you know? But I've slacked off because nobody wants to get fat. The stuff that I want to make is bars and cookies and everything, but I guess I'm not suffering that's for sure. And the Sage lecture series, the Olli classes, I've signed up for, uh, I was going to do an art history course, but I decided to go for comedy and it's everybody it's encompassed the lives of Charlie Chaplin to George Carlin. I usually take something with Terry Foster in music or anything in history, Maine history.

Diane: Have you always been like that, that you have lots of things that you're interested in?

Elizabeth: Yes. Yeah. I've always been active I never excelled at any sport, but I played everything, even football. I played football with my brother and his groups.

Diane: Were you raised with just brothers?

Elizabeth: No, just one brother. Just one brother. He joined the Navy and he became a jet pilot and he was involved in World War Two and he had one bombing mission on Japan and then the carrier was hit and so they had to go back to Washington state and, uh, he is deceased. He died of ALS. Oh dear. That was very sad. Very sad. How long has he been gone? Oh, since 1992.

Diane: Did you grow up in Portland or Westbrook or ...?

Elizabeth: No, I grew up in South Hadley, Mass. My father was born in Westbrook and all the Winslow's back were in Maine. My grandfather was a machinist at the Dana Warp Mill and his boss said, George, let's go to North Adams, Mass, we can make more money there so he took the family to North Adams, Mass, and then that same boss, and it's funny, I remember his name, it was Frank Dennis. I can remember my father saying that when he was the reason they moved so much. So then from North Adams they went to South Hadley and there was a Carew manufacturing there that he worked in. And he never drove a car. He walked, we probably lived maybe a half a mile from that mill, and he walked down the hill back up for lunch, back down and back home. And I think that's probably why he lived to be 95. And, uh, also, he ate a lot of peanuts.

Diane: Oh. Secret to longevity walking and eating peanuts.

Elizabeth: Oh. And my father went to Philadelphia Textile School, became a textile broker in Fall River, Mass. then he went to work for his brother-in-law Butler and Prentice in New York and, so at that time, my family, including my brother lived in Mount Vernon, New York, right outside of the city. And that's where they lived when I was born but I was born in the Holyoke Hospital. My mother came up to have me near her family for help.

Diane: So, your brother is an older brother?

Elizabeth: Yes, he's older. He was older. Yeah. Three years.

Diane: Did you do a lot of moving around in your childhood or did you settle?

Elizabeth: No. After? Well, the depression came, and that company closed in New York and my father couldn't find any work, so we went back to South Hadley and I don't even

remember that. I was probably three or four and we went back to South Hadley and lived in a two-family house with my grandparents on the first floor and us upstairs and that was it. I lived there until I was married until I went to West Junior and then I went back home, and I worked for a year and then I was married in '48 and moved up here. I met my husband while I was at Westbrook Junior.

Diane: Okay. So, when you were growing up your father was the breadwinner in the family, right?

Elizabeth: Yes. My mother was at home.

Diane: But did he ever find work during the depression?

Elizabeth: Oh yeah. I don't know how it happened, but he had a gas station. He must've had a loan and gotten a gas station. And I think my grandfather might have helped him. I don't know.

Diane: He went from textiles and from basically running a company to a owning a gas station?

Elizabeth: Yes. And people used to go just to see the guy running the gas station with a shirt and tie on.

Diane: He sounds like a very intriguing man.

Elizabeth: He was smart and after he sold the gas station about the time I was married, it might've been before or right after, he went to work for another relative. My mother's cousin had a silk screen printing business, and the guy was an artist and he needed a good bookkeeper and manager kind of thing. And that's what my father did. And he also learned how to do the screen printing. So, he did some of everything.

Diane: So, you lived through a depression, you lived through World War II. Were you affected by World War II in any way, besides your brother?

Elizabeth: My father was an air raid warden and we'd have blackouts practices where everybody would shut their lights off and pull their shades down in case of air raids so that there weren't any lights showing the bombers where to hit. We never got bombed, but we had to be ready. So, when we had those nights, he'd have to patrol the neighborhood and make sure no one had any lights showing. Also, I had the job of mixing the color in the margarine. We could not have butter because it was going to the servicemen and so, I had the job of mixing the yellow powder in the white lard or whatever it was to make it look more palatable. And, also, we had war bond rallies so people would donate money over at Holyoke right in the downtown area. They would build up a stage and they'd have live music and singers and entertainers. We'd go to watch those. Also, Westover Air Force Base was right near us too. So, there were a lot of military people around Holyoke. There was a big parade when the war ended in '45.

Diane: And your brother came home safe and sound.

Elizabeth: My brother came home safe and sound. Yes. And after that, he went to the Naval school of justice and he was stationed in Boulder, Colorado and he decided then when he retired, he would settle in either New England or Colorado and his last tour of duty was on the faculty of the Naval War College in Newport and that's where he retired and that's where he died.

Diane: How old was he when he was diagnosed with ALS?

Elizabeth: He was probably like 68 because he was 72 when he died. When my brother got to the stage where they wanted to put him on oxygen, he refused it. And he just went to the hospital and they just kept him comfortable. And I think he was only there like two weeks or so.

Diane: It's inevitable that you're going to lose people. The older you are, the longer you live, the more likely you're going to have loss.

Elizabeth: Yes. I had my 70th reunion at Westbrook Junior and there were four of us that attended the reunion and the other three had dementia. They didn't know who was going to pick them up or who brought them or anything. It was really sad, and they were smart women, had good jobs or were intelligent and it just doesn't matter. Just doesn't matter.

Diane: No, it doesn't. Did you find that as you started to get older, say in your seventies, did you ever have any issues with not remembering something or looking for a word?

Elizabeth: Uh, not so much then, but I am now. In fact, I will look at the price of Prevagen in the other day. The memory drug? It's a memory drug, yeah. I was looking at that and gee, that's too expensive, I don't want to buy that. I'll wait until it tells me I need it. One thing that at my age, that's good, I can't get early onset anything. My brother got sick with that and I found out that in some cases it is familial then that's when we got long-term care insurance. I thought, oh, we'd better do that. We got it in about '96. And isn't it expensive when you get it later in life? Yeah, you wonder if it's worth it. As I said about COVID, I don't mind dying, I just don't want to be sick. I haven't had any serious illnesses. I've had two hips replaced and I've had cataracts removed and lens implants put in. Other than that, I have not had any knock on wood, of course.

Diane: Yes. When you had the lenses in did it mean you didn't have to wear your glasses anymore?

Elizabeth: Right. I started wearing glasses in my fifties and it's a good thing I did because I worked on the 1960 census and that print was so small, if I hadn't had glasses, I never would have been able to do it. So, then I went into hard contacts and then soft contacts. And then, the closest in one eye and distance in the other instead of bifocals. And so, then I went into those and then after I had the lens implants, I didn't need anything. I can read pretty small print without them, but I wear them for night driving because they do help me see better at night. And I don't do a lot of night driving either and I wear them for concerts and anything that's far away.

So, you said that you lived in South Hadley, Massachusetts, and then when you graduated from high school, you came up to Maine and you went to, was it Westbrook College then? No, it was Westbrook Junior and I was a liberal arts student thinking that if I really wanted to continue, I could go to Mount Holyoke. And that's one of my biggest regrets that I didn't go to Mount Holyoke. I didn't see the value of it then, I guess. Nobody was pushing me or pulling me and I that's what I probably needed. I just didn't. I worked in the office of a paper mill for a year and then, we were married in the fall of '48 and I moved up here and I've been here ever since. And it's interesting because my father's family all are Mainers. My mother's family came over from England in the 1880s and they carried on an interesting tradition, Christmas Eve parties. And my mother's mother was one of eight. There were five girls and three boys, and they had Christmas Eve parties. The three boys came over, they came over first to Holyoke the girls came, but they continued these Christmas Eve gatherings for 104 years. Oh, my. Continuously. When the guys were here, they did them themselves and their

wives and so forth, and then the aunts came over and did it. When the family enlarged and spread out, we had to change it to summer, but we still had the family gatherings and continued for 104 years.

Diane: What a wonderful memory.

Elizabeth: It is. Yes. And those two aunts, my mother's mother's sisters were, they were wonderful. They had a little apartment in Holyoke, and they had the King George and Queen Elizabeth portraits, and they were bloody English, and they served tea and anytime we went to Holyoke shopping, we had to go see the aunts. One of them was the first in the first class of nurses at Holyoke Hospital and the other one was some time after her, also a nurse. That's an interesting family history. They were Protestant French in France. Their name was Parfait. When they went to England to escape what was going on in France, they changed it to Parfitt. My mother's mother was a Parfit and then she married Benjamin Webster and so my mother was Ruth Elizabeth Webster.

Diane: And then she married Winslow? Sumner Winslow. Do you remember where in Westbrook your dad grew up?

Elizabeth: Well, there's a little house across from the Dana Warp Mill, I mean, there's a little short street called Winslow street. And I think that's probably where my grandfather lived, but, you know, I don't know where if my father grew up there or if they lived somewhere else, but there is a James Winslow house in Westbrook who was like my six times great grandfather. And he had built a small house on the bank of the Presumpscot in Westbrook, and then it was later moved and added onto. Dr. Stockwell has the house now. My two nieces from Newport were up visiting and I said, I'll take you over and show you the house. I don't think we can go in because the owner at one time, they told me at the Westbrook Historical Society that he liked to show it off, but I called two or three times at the office and home and there wasn't any response. So, I said, we won't be able to go in, but when we got over there, they were out in the yard getting ready to go to the dump, a doctor and his wife. And so, I introduced my nieces and told them who we were and why we were there, and he said, would you like to see the inside of the house? I said, we'd love to. The low ceilings on wide full boards and the fireplace, it was interesting. There's a piano there and I said, who plays the piano? And Dr. Stockwell said, I do. And he sat down and he played and come to find out he plays at, or he did play at Muddy Rudder Friday nights, so that was interesting. A little aside.

Diane: You're very musical or do you just like music?

Elizabeth: I like music and I had violin lessons when I was six. My uncle George played the flute for the Springfield Symphony and he bought me a little child's size violin and I took lessons, but long story short, I wouldn't practice. I didn't like it well enough to practice. Then I took piano lessons somewhere in like eighth grade through high school or for a couple of years, same deal. I wouldn't practice and clarinet. I don't remember a clarinet teacher, so I think the South Hadley band and orchestra leader must've taught me how to play. I played in the band and orchestra.

Diane: And you played the clarinet?

Elizabeth: Yes. Played the clarinet. My brother played the trumpet. my parents loved to sing. I mean, we, on those Christmas gatherings, they both had good voices and loved to sing. And my aunt played the piano and my uncle George would play the flute. Aunt Clara would play the piano and we'd sing all the Christmas carols. And I miss that now because we don't, we have one musician in the family. My grandson Trevor plays the guitar and he has played for

us a few Christmases. He has three little girls now. He doesn't have a lot of time to practice or anything, but I have to remind them that we would like it if he would play one or two. Another thing I did all summer to keep busy was gardening. God, I love that. Pulling weeds and digging up things and planting things. And it's mostly perennials, but I have to add annuals for color. Sure. and it's all under snow now. Right? Have you lived in this house? Yes. We bought this house in '61 and we've been here ever since.

Diane: So, when you got married, you moved to Maine, and you've raised, you raised a lovely daughter. I only know your daughter, Andie. don't remember if she was at Pine Grove when my younger daughter was there, but she was my older daughter's teacher and my older daughter loved her. Just loved her. Everybody loved your daughter.

Elizabeth: We would have tears rolling down our cheeks, reading the letters that she got from parents. I mean, that was her niche.

Diane: You must have been a pretty good mother.

Elizabeth: I think I was. I wish that I had gotten them all into something musical, but we didn't have the resources. We did rent a piano once for Andie. She thought she wanted to play, but there again, it was, crack the whip to practice.

Diane: Like mother, like daughter. Yes. How many kids do you have?

Elizabeth: Three. I have a son and two daughters, and my son owns the house now we sold it to him and his wife. 87, I think it was. I have a daughter in Florida, and she was a teacher and they had an excavation business and he put gas lines in for the gas company. One year he lost the bid and they sold everything and went out West and did a lot of exploring.

Diane: That's wonderful. You know, there are some people who just sit and stew about everything that's going wrong. And then there are other people who say, okay, how are we going to deal with this?

Elizabeth: Right. The resilience is a very important piece of your character, I think.

Diane: Would you call yourself a resilient person?

Elizabeth: Very, yes. And I have a positive attitude and I'm full of gratitude.

Diane: And you've always been like that?

Elizabeth: As far as I can remember. Yes. I've always been happy. Yes.

Diane: So, you mentioned that you did regret not going to Mount Holyoke. Is that your one regret?

Elizabeth: Yes. That's my biggest. My second one is I wish I had started hiking like 20, 30 years ago. I'd still be hiking, probably. I don't even like to walk. You know what I do for exercise instead of walking, I dance, I have four CDs that I love. Benny Goodman jazz, I think it's the one at Carnegie Hall, and then, Dionne Warwick. Steve and Edie. Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme. These are before your time.

Diane: So, what, you put the music on and then you just dance around the house?

Elizabeth: Yup. Right in my kitchen. God love you. My kitchen is big enough so I can just make a loop into the bathroom. It's good exercise. I try to do 20 minutes to half an hour, probably three times a week.

Diane: But you don't like to hike or walk?

Elizabeth: I don't like to walk. Why you don't just go out and walk the neighborhood? I don't know. It's a really nice day. I can talk myself into it, but I'd rather dance. Sounds good to me. I think it's better than walking. I've never had any doctor tell me it was better for me than walking but I enjoy it and I'm more than walking. And so.

Diane: So, this is going to sound like an odd question, but when did you realize that you were getting older?

Elizabeth: Oh, I don't know. Keith and I took a trip to England. I was good then. And in the early nineties I took the trip to Europe. I was 85. Did the seven countries in 15 days on and off the bus. And I think that was when I realized, well, I'm not as young as I used to be.

Diane: What was different?

Elizabeth: Oh, it was getting up early and getting the suitcase out by the hotel door so the bus driver could get it on the bus and running all day and that kind of thing. I think made me realize that I should have done this 10 or 15 years ago. But I think I'm so lucky because I just feel so good.

Diane: Knock on wood. Knock on wood.

Elizabeth: I'm just lucky I have my health and economic security is very important.

Diane: Did you ever work outside the home?

Elizabeth: I did. When title nine came in and they had teacher aides, I worked as a teacher assistant. If you had two years of college, you're classified as a teacher assistant, so that's what I was for I think it was 14 years. And Jack Junior and Portland High School. And then, one of the teachers at Jack used to say to me, when are you going to get a real job? After my daughter graduated from college, Andrea, I decided it was time. So, I did temporary work all that summer. I worked in Aetna Insurance and Maine Savings student loans and an architectural firm and I liked them all and they all wanted me to stay, but I wasn't ready to do that. Then the Maine Dental Association had an ad in the paper for somebody who could do mailings and I thought Oh gosh, I could do that. And, so I did that. I went to work, and it was just the executive director was a woman three years older than I and we got along great and she taught me the ropes and I was called the administrative secretary, but I didn't do shorthand, but she did. And so, she did all that heavy stuff and I did a lot of recordkeeping and billing and I learned the computer. We went to ADA headquarters in Chicago and I learned the computer. I hadn't had any experience with it till then. So, then I did dues billing and all the record keeping. There was a lot of different things to it., I really enjoyed that. There was nothing boring about that job. And we arranged the annual conventions at the Samoset and, that was fun. After that I collect social security.

Diane: When you took that job, you were in your sixties?

Elizabeth: I think it was in my early fifties and I worked for them until they moved the office to Augusta and then I didn't want to travel.

Diane: Sure. And then you took social security. So, you must have been 65?

Elizabeth: I took it early at 62. I had a friend just talked to him the other day he lives in Maryland now he said the smart thing to do is take it now. And he was a CPA and a financial officer for Cunard Cruise Lines in New York. I took his advice and took it early. And you're

glad you did? Yes. And I thought I would be bored to tears without a job, but I volunteered first with the Greater Portland Landmarks and I did each thing for about five years as much to be busy as to learn about those things, Greater Portland Landmarks, Meals on Wheels. Keith went with me, I talked him into going with me to do the driving and then I would do the running and he wasn't too well. He had a lot of arthritis from football injuries. Arthritis and then heart problems and strokes. And, but anyway, when I met him, he had dropped out of Bowdoin because he couldn't play football. And the doctor said, I think the best thing for you is winter in Florida, so he had been to Florida for the winter. When I met him, here he is tanned, and his hair is all golden and he was a handsome jock is what he was. How did we get there?

Diane: I don't know, but it sounds like another lovely memory. We were talking about that he went with you when the Meals on Wheels.

Elizabeth: Yeah, that's what I did. I did Meals on Wheels and then the VNA, Oh, the hospice of Southern Maine was up here, two houses up their headquarters. I decided that would be a good thing to know. So, I took that for, I think it was a year course, and I still have the notebook from that. My life is in notebooks. I have 28 photo albums. I started when I was in high school and I'm still putting stuff in and I have a notebook on the house. I searched the title and then there's a lot of family history in with the notebook, more of the house history. Interesting. And then on my trip to Europe I did, uh, photos and journals.

Diane: Did you go on that trip with your husband?

Elizabeth: No, he had it on the trip to England. He is not a traveler plus not feeling really good, he didn't want to do anything. So, I did that trip with a friend from high school. In fact, we met in like the eighth grade. Her husband worked for the phone company and got transferred up here and when she came up here, she said, let's go to the Y and take bridge lessons. Now we went to the Y and for \$3, we got an hour of volleyball, which I loved, then a coffee break and then bridge lessons with Ruth Tucker and she was wonderful. We both had three-year-old daughters, so we could bring them, and they had babysitting, you know, while we were doing the volleyball and the bridge, they were taken care of. And it was all for \$3 And we met some other girls there and Ruth Tucker said I'll come to your homes if you want to continue this. And we formed a group and two tables, and she came and taught us there.

Diane: I loved you saying that your friend said let's take bridge lessons and then you went, okay. I love that attitude.

Elizabeth: Yeah, she got me into bridge and she just passed away this last year. She was still living in Florida and she was going to come up and I was checking out Ashton Gardens for her. She didn't have any real good friends in Florida. And I said come up here and we can do stuff together. And so, she was going to do that. And, uh, she went to the doctor and he told her she had lung cancer. And she said, I don't feel any different, I don't feel sick, but she lasted probably a year from that time till she just died in I think it was September.

Diane: So, we've touched upon this a little bit, losing people. How do you cope with that?

Elizabeth: Well, you have to. You have to just keep living and it's not that you forget them, but in your prayers, they're there. And in your thoughts, they're there. And it's just a bump in the road of life. When you lose people there, it's got to happen, and you just have to keep going no matter what.

Diane: When did you lose your husband?

Elizabeth: In '06. He had had two strokes and then he got cancer. He had heart problems and lung cancer and yeah, He was sick. We were running to the doctor all the time and finally, one of the VNA people came and we had a little conversation. And she said how would you feel about having a hospital bed in the house.? And I said, well, I would, but I just think he'd give up completely if he were in a hospital bed and that's what happened. We brought a hospital bed in right in the living room where he could watch TV. He was a big TV fan of all sports, even bowling. Of course, he was an excellent football and baseball player. He played basketball, but he didn't really like it that much, but I'll tell you, he was one of the few four-star, athletes to come out of h he was practicing baseball one day and they were having a track meet. And one guy didn't show up for the long jump or the broad jump or whatever it was. And so, they got Keith to come over and fill in and he won it. So that's how he got four Letterman. That's what they call four Letterman. But anyway, he didn't have an easy demise or anything. He's been gone for 14 years.

Diane: He didn't have an easy demise, but you became a caregiver. And how was that? How was that for you? Was it stressful?

Elizabeth: Well, I was glad I was able to, but I grieved more during that time than I did after he left, I mean, I just, I knew what was coming and it was hard to take, but I was glad I was physically able to take care of him as much as I did.

Diane: How long were you married?

Elizabeth: 57 and a half years.

Diane: It's a long time. Any wisdom you'd like to share about being married to the same person for that long?

Elizabeth: Well, forgiveness is one thing and humor. He had a great sense of humor. Mine isn't bad, but he was better. And, I think those are two most important things of marriage. There's always that bond of love and admiration that you have when you first meet. And I think you keep reverting to that. Plus, the sense of humor forgiving little things, having a positive attitude, being grateful for having each other, as long as we did. You know, those, those are important things.

Diane: After he was gone — you said you did most of your grieving in those last years or months?

Elizabeth: Right, right. Every time he had a stroke or had a trip to the hospital. Yeah. Yeah.

Diane: And after he was gone, though, you had to adjust to this new...

Elizabeth: Right. And, you know, it's so important to have children. I don't know how people do it alone with no children. They were just so very supportive and helpful and, loving. That's so important to feel that. And also, as I say, I've always had life goes on attitude, no matter what. You can't sit in the past and grieve and be sorry for yourself. I think self-pity is a luxury nobody can afford.

Diane: Right. So, you didn't allow yourself any time to feel bad?

Elizabeth: I did. I was sad but not all day, every day.

Diane: And then does it really happen that as time goes on, it does get easier?

Elizabeth: Well, it does, but it's funny. It's still there. And if I see like, um, I saw a nurse that worked with him, one of the hospice nurses, I just bumped into her and I broke down. It just brought that back. I was having a colonoscopy and the doctor asked me how long he'd been gone and then it hit me again. It's one of those things. And I, in my prayers, I always say hold Keith in your arms as part of them. And that makes me feel better. Nothing can erase the grief, but there are little things you can say to yourself to keep yourself going.

Diane: Did you find that you became busier or did you keep doing all the things that you enjoy doing?

Elizabeth: Oh, I kept doing things. I think that was after he died, that I joined OLLI, the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. That fall or the year after.

Diane: You must be really busy, even if everything is remote now. Right. Are you busy all the time?

Elizabeth: Yes, just about, I mean, not, yes, I have plenty to do. I have to have some time for reading and I don't have anything on Monday, and Tuesday I have yoga. My new class will be on Wednesday. I don't have anything on Thursday, but I have bridge on Friday. And then the weekends are probably with, I have a friend who can't drive, and I like to do what I can to help her.

Diane: And then between this you're dancing around your apartment.

Elizabeth: Or yes, the dancing. I have to have time to dance and garden, if it's nice.

Diane: I like to ask people, what do you look forward to? But it strikes me that you have so many things to look forward to.

Elizabeth: You know, the first thing in the morning is my coffee and puzzle page in the newspaper. I've got a routine going and I have the same thing for breakfast, probably the healthiest meal I eat. Do you want to hear what I have for breakfast? A quarter of a cup of wild blueberries, then I put those in the microwave to thaw them for 20 seconds while that's doing, I turn around and I do squats while I get my stuff out of the refrigerator. That's about five squats because I use hemp seed, flax meal, yogurt, orange juice, and chopped nuts. That's five squats, and my coffee mate, that's six. So, that's my, my routine while the blueberries are thawing, I get those things out and then I throw it all together and let it all meld while I do the coffee and the puzzle page.

Diane: You've got a positive attitude. You keep your body working, you keep your brain working, you keep your spirits up, you're full of good advice without even giving us any advice. Just living by example.

Elizabeth: Right. Honesty is the best policy and cleanliness is next to godliness. I remember that from the seventh grade, my homeroom teacher wrote things on the blackboard. That's the only one I remember.

Diane: Is there anything that you have learned about getting older that you'd like to let other people know? Like, is there anything that we should be aware of that kind of caught you by surprise?

Elizabeth: I don't know. You'll have to make those end of life arrangements ahead. And as I said, I wrote my obit, but you don't even have to put it in the paper. You can just put a death notice in. I'm trying to make it as easy as I can for them.

Diane: What did you say in your obit? What is it that you want people to know?

Elizabeth: No, nothing spectacular just who my parents were and my survived bys and the things that I, volunteered for because oh, I was in the Woodford's Club and the Woman's Literary Union, too. Those are both defunct now. There aren't enough young people joining things like that to keep them going. They're too busy. the mothers have two jobs and children usually.

Diane: Do you think the world is different today than when you were younger?

Elizabeth: Definitely. If we couldn't afford something, we didn't get it but now credit cards, people build up credit card debt. I think that's one important part of life — getting into debt that people do now that we didn't do, because we didn't have credit cards. Not that I wouldn't have done it I had a credit card, I don't know. But life is so much easier with washers and dryers and, let's see, how else is life easier? I had the use of a car because my aunt who lived downstairs couldn't drive anymore and I was in high school, so I had the use of her car. I was lucky. I could take my friends to the games and stuff like that.

Diane: And you're still driving.

Elizabeth: Yes, I just had my license renewed last year.

Diane: Physically, is your body as strong as it was when you were 73?

Elizabeth: No. No. Lugging the groceries is probably the hardest thing I do. I keep bags in the car so if they overload one bag, I can split it into two bags. And there are certain things like sometimes I can't open a jar, but I have a thing under the cupboard that I slide the jar on which solves that problem. I can't play pickleball. I started to play pickleball and I fell, but not playing pickleball. I fell at a concert. I tripped on somebody's handbag straps and landed right on this shoulder. I went back to try to play pickleball and I can't serve it. I can't get that ball past the kitchen. I can hit it overhand to the back wall, but you have to serve underhand and I can't do it. That's a weakness. Then this past Labor Day, we had a family birthday party for me in the yard, six feet apart with masks and everything. Cornhole game. So, I'm standing by the end of that and someone came along and I stepped back to make room and I fell on the left shoulder. So, I do have those two problems. They're both weak and my dryer's on top of my washer and I have to strain to get to the back of that. You said that you do the countertop pushups? Yes, I do those for those shoulders, and I think that's why this one healed up faster. I didn't even go to therapy for this one. This one, I did PT for like six weeks and it still didn't come out perfect. I'm not looking forward to playing pickleball anymore.

Diane: But the fact that you were playing pickleball, that's pretty cool.

Elizabeth: Yes, that was probably three, four or five years ago. And I was good. The teacher said, how old are you? And I told her, and she said, if I went into the Senior Games, I'd win everything in my age group.

Diane: Do you have a legacy? Is there something that you want people to know about you?

Elizabeth: I just want to be remembered as a kind helpful charitable nice person. I don't excel. I've never excelled at anything. But you know, I'm very grateful that I have my health.

Diane: And you have a wonderful attitude. I think that you're outstanding in your attitude toward life.

Elizabeth: Positive attitude and gratitude are my favorite words.

Diane: So, I guess we're probably going to wind up. We've talked for maybe a couple of hours. I lost track. Any final words of wisdom that you would like to impart?

Elizabeth: Forget about what's bad about your life. Concentrate on what's good. And try to make other people happy do for other people. I have lots of opportunities to do little things, like baking goodies. And I have family to give them to, and little great granddaughters who visit that I can do things for. I think that's an important part is the giving to your family, friends, whoever needs it.

Diane: Well, I am very grateful that you have given us some of yourself today. I appreciate that very, very much.

Elizabeth: Well, hasn't been as nerve wracking as I thought it would be. You're a very good interview. You're good at what you do.

Diane: Thank you. I appreciate that. It was fun and I think that you've inspired me to want to put on some music and go dance. And I think that we will leave people with a lot of happy thoughts and inspiration.

You have been listening to the *Catching Health* Podcast. I'm Diane Atwood, host and producer, and I have been talking with the delightful Liz Johnson. Thank you for spending time with us and thank you to our *Catching Health* sponsors, Avita of Stroudwater, a memory care facility and Stroudwater Lodge, an assisted living community, both in Westbrook, Maine. My mother who had Alzheimer's lived at Avita for about two years and she received excellent care and a lot of love. So did the entire family. For more information about both facilities, go to Northbridgecos.com. To read my blog *Catching Health*, listen to more episodes of the *Catching Health* podcast, and find a transcript of my conversation with Liz Johnson, go to catchinghealth.com. That's it for now. Stay well, I hope you have a great day.

Elizabeth: That was a blast, Diane