

At 100, Millie Stroman is 'always ready to go'

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

At 100, Millie Stroman isn't into computers or cell phones, but has a top-notch network that keeps her connected.

It starts in her neighborhood along Bunker Hill Street in Fredericksburg, where she's been part of the scenery since World War II. She and her husband, Billy, rented a bungalow there when he was assigned to Fort A.P. Hill as a mechanic. They've moved once since the late 1940s—when a house went up for sale a few doors down.

He died in 1987. The Stromans never

had kids, but became surrogate parents and grandparents to many who gravitated toward the kindly couple.

Friends, neighbors and former co-workers have continued to include Millie—that's what everyone calls her—in their own family events, or taxi her to appointments, senior citizen events and shopping.

"She has lots of friends willing to take her places, and she's always ready to go," said Becky Taylor, adding that someone just has to issue the invitation and Millie responds: "OK, give me a minute."

Taylor lived next to the Stromans for

11 years, then moved to Spotsylvania County in 1984, but hardly severed ties with her former neighbor. Millie is a guest in the Taylor home every Christmas morning, and the two see each other regularly. Last month, they went strawberry picking, a tradition they've shared for decades.

Millie tasted quite a few berries, to the point she had such a distinct red line on her top lip, she looked ready for an ad that asked: "Got Strawberries?" She gave away most of what she picked to thank neighbors who helped her get back on

SEE MILLIE, A5

her feet after she fell over a garbage can and broke her hip in December 2017.

"They were all so good to me," she said.

The goodness goes both ways, said neighbor Brad Hedrick.

"She's a very lovable—and likable—soul," he said.

He and his wife, Kim, adopted her as the next-door grandmother when they moved into the neighborhood 22 years ago. They take her to church every Sunday and are amazed by her resiliency and fierce, independent spirit.

"She doesn't like other people doing stuff for her," Hedrick said. "She'd rather do it herself."

'SHE WAS STILL GOING'

Those who celebrated Millie's century mark in March aren't the slightest bit surprised that she's still bending over to pick berries, hanging up laundry on a clothesline or making "Dilly Pickles," using cucumbers and herbs grown in her garden.

"She's phenomenal, I don't know anyone like her," Taylor said, adding she always laughs when Millie tells the doctor she doesn't have any aches or pains. Taylor, 71, wished she could say the same.

Wende Herlan met Millie in 1975 when Herlan was the head nurse of the Amy Guest wing of Mary Washington Hospital and Mille was a housekeeper. The hospital was on Fall Hill Avenue then—walking distance from Millie's house—and the women struck up a friendship that's lasted for decades.

"She's just extraordinary, exceptional as far as someone who can physically and mentally accomplish things," said Herlan, who's 67 and lives in Stafford County.

Activities with Millie tend to turn into adventures, as was the case on Tuesday, Herlan said.

Millie was up at 6 a.m. to vote in the primary election. Brad Hedrick took her to the polls, blown away by the fact that someone born the same year Congress gave women the right to vote



Millie dries her laundry on a clothesline, no matter the season, just as she's done all her life.

is still casting ballots 100 years later.

She was ready for a photographer and reporter to visit at 9 a.m. and had laundry to hang and kale to pick. Herlan came at 1 p.m. to take her shopping for more tomato plants—because Millie had only four, and they wouldn't produce enough to fill her basement shelves with jars of canned tomatoes. She likes to share homemade soup with neighbors, and store-bought canned tomatoes won't do.

"It's altogether different in the taste if you can them yourself," Millie said.

She didn't want to pay a couple dollars per plant, so Herlan took her to a second mega-store, where the women scoured clearance racks for a six-pack of plants. Millie was so thrilled to pay about a quarter each that she also bought flowers for hanging baskets "because why stop at a garden full of vegetables?" Herlan quipped.

Herlan shuttled Millie to a 3 p.m. appointment to check on a problem she's had lately with anemia, then they went to the bank and grocery store. They were back at Bunker Hill Street by 6 p.m., and a neighbor invited Millie over for burgers.

Millie accepted—then told Herlan she'd get the tomato plants in the ground after that.

"I said, 'Millie, please don't,'" Herlan recalled, always reluctant to tell the older woman what to do because she believes it's important to respect her choices and maintain her dignity.

Then, Herlan remembered the clothes on the line. She brought them in and suggested that Millie



Millie fills her hand with strawberries she picked with a friend.

fold them as her evening chore. By day's end, Herlan was ready to drop.

"I was exhausted, but she was still going," she said.

ENOUGH WITH THE BABIES

One doctor told Millie she's lived so long because she never had kids.

She would say she had her share of taking care of them—and then some—as the oldest girl in a family of 10 children. She grew up on a farm in Fairview, Ill., about 200 miles southwest of Chicago. Cooking and caring for babies were among her responsibilities.

In the morning, she'd get the children ready for school, pack their lunches, then race out the door. Once home, she was back in the kitchen, baking six loaves, every other day, and a big black pan full of biscuits for dinner. She couldn't count the potatoes peeled in her lifetime, but learned well the lesson to remove every last piece of skin.

Sometimes, Millie would let her mother know the family had plenty of mouths to feed.

"I'd stomp my feet and say, 'Stop having babies, we don't have room for any

more,' but she didn't pay attention," Millie said.

Millie got married at age 20, and her attitude about having kids was "OK if I did, and OK if I didn't." She and Billy didn't, but not for lack of trying, she said.

They were married in 1939, and he was drafted during World War II. She's foggy on the dates, but knows his skills as an automobile mechanic brought them east to Virginia. She worked locally at a shoe factory, then in housekeeping at the hospital. She took care of her husband as his health failed, and still did her job at the hospital, until she stopped working a few years after his death.

"When I retired, I painted every room in the house, then I went out and painted the fence, and when I was finished, I said, 'What am I gonna do now?'"

HARD WORK IS KEY

Her calendar hangs beside her living room chair, and she likes to have something written in each square. If she's not going to senior events at community centers in Fredericksburg or Spotsylvania, she's out with friends. If she's not on the go, she's sitting in that chair, crocheting dishcloths, despite arthritis in her hands. She's got several bins full of the cloths which she gives away, six at a time.

If the repeated motion of hooking and slipping knots gets uncomfortable, she takes out a book of word searches.

She has no grand secret for longevity, other than what the doctor told her about not having kids. She would say hard work and staying active has kept her going, and that she'd like to continue that trend. She'd use her own two feet to do all the errands that she could, just like on Monday, when she walked the half mile to the Dorothy Hart Community Center for bingo.

"You never heard such a commotion," Millie said, about friends there and others in her network who later pitched a fit about her walking. "I figured I needed the exercise."

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