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TOP STORY

'We all want to be like her': Amherst woman prepares to celebrate 104th birthday

Justin Faulconer

Dec 26, 2023

For just more than 40 years, Mildred Rose has lived in her home on East Monitor Road a few miles west of the town of Amherst.

The house was a longtime goal of Rose and her late husband, Oscar, to spend their retirement after decades of living in Camden, New Jersey. Rose said the couple lived in New Jersey largely for employment reasons and were happy to return to Amherst in 1982.

“It was home,” Mildred said.



Mildred Rose at her home on Thursday, Dec. 14, 2023.

More than 40 years later, she is preparing to celebrate her 104th birthday Jan. 13.

Mildred was raised on a farm in the Puppy Creek area. In January 1920, the month she was born, national events included the beginning of Prohibition, the founding of the American Civil Liberties Union and baseball legend Babe Ruth's historic trade to the New York Yankees became public.

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In Mildred's world in rural Amherst County, her parents, Anderson and Alma, were farmers and she recalls them selling tobacco.

"It was hard," Mildred said. "On the farm, we had food but we didn't have any money. We all left home as soon as we were old enough to do some work. We needed to make money."



Mildred Rose talks about her life at her home on Thursday, Dec. 14, 2023. Also pictured is Kathleen Rose, her daughter-in-law.

Paige Dingler, The News & Advance

Mildred had 10 siblings and she was the third eldest.

“We all stuck together,” Mildred said. “We had a hard time but a good time too.”

Three of her brothers served in World War II. Mildred went to a small school in Puppy Creek during the era of segregation through the eighth grade but didn’t graduate so she could work.

“As soon as I got old enough to work, I made money and bought things for the other children,” Mildred said.

She was 19 when she married Oscar and the couple had two children, Walter and Arthur. The couple were active at Piney Grove Baptist Church in Puppy Creek and Oscar was a trustee there, Walter said.



A photo of Mildred Rose in her 20s at her home on Thursday, Dec. 14, 2023.

Paige Dingler, The News & Advance

Mildred still goes to church every Sunday as much as she can, Wanda Smith, her granddaughter, said.

“Everybody asks about her when she’s not there,” Kathleen Rose, Smith’s mother and Mildred’s daughter-in-law, said.

Walter credits much of his mother’s longevity to healthy habits, avoiding smoking and alcohol and drinking plenty of water. He said his grandparents had 109 acres in the county and when his parents lived in New Jersey they often sent money for needs such as refrigerator repairs. “It was a tight family,” Walter said.

Mildred said she was 62 and Oscar was 65 when they moved back to Amherst County. For a period, her two sons lived with Mildred’s mother while she worked, she recalled.

Mildred and Oscar worked for years at a New Jersey company that makes fountain pens, Kathleen said. Mildred has spent much time gardening, canning and making quilts for family members, including six grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Mildred still cooks for herself and does laundry, Kathleen said.

“We all want to be like her,” Kathleen said. “Whenever any of family members come, this is the first stop. They always have to come to see Aunt Mil. And she enjoys having company.”

This year marked 20 years since Oscar’s death and Mildred affectionately remembers the decades they spent together. Smith said Oscar was a “no-nonsense” man who loved his family deeply and loved listening to singer Gladys Knight.

“Everything that I do, I just want to make them proud because I understand the history — it wasn’t easy for them,” Smith said of her grandparents. “All the avenues that are open to me now were not in existence when they were going through their trials. Everything I do, I want to it be something that makes it all worthwhile for the sacrifices that she put in and they put in.”

Kathleen said Mildred taught her a lot about gardening and canning vegetables.

“It’s hard work, believe me,” Kathleen said. “It’s a joy seeing your things grow but the work you put into it is a lot.”



Wanda Smith, granddaughter, holds her grandmother's quilts on Thursday, Dec. 14, 2023. One of Mildred Rose's hobbies is making quilts for family members that Smith describes as prized possessions.

Paige Dingler, The News & Advance

Smith said everyone in the family has a homemade quilt from Mildred, adding her grandmother made one for her daughter at college when she found out she needed one. Her grandfather helped Mildred for a long time with the hobby.

"It's like one of those possessions that you keep in a safe place that you know you're going to pass down ... it's a precious piece of her," Smith said of the quilts. "It was an activity they did together.

Smith, who is supervisor for Math, Science, Gifted and Elected programs for Amherst County Public Schools, said her grandparents' strong work ethic had a major influence on her life.

"I can't even imagine that as a mother, having to leave my children behind so I can go find work but it's a testament of trying to work toward something better for not just yourself but your family," Smith said.

Smith said Mildred made sacrifices that put her father, Walter, in a position to create a method for his two daughters to excel and go to college.

“It’s so much attributed to the work they put in prior to that to make that a possibility for us,” Smith said. “So I can never thank them enough.”

Smith recalls attending Hampton University and coming to see Mildred with a friend.

“When we wanted a good meal, this is where we came to visit and we always left with canned goods,” Smith said. “I remember that’s how they showed love, that’s how they poured into other people.”



(From left) Kathleen and Walter Rose, Mildred Rose, and Wanda Smith in Amherst on Thursday, Dec. 14, 2023.

Paige Dingler photos, The News & Advance

Smith said her grandmother marking 104 years next month is a significant achievement and her resiliency and ability to endure challenges has served as an inspiration and motivation for her family that covers five generations. Mildred’s

younger sister also recently celebrated her 100th birthday, another of her siblings lived to be 108 and a younger brother is in his 90s, Smith said.

Photos of Mildred's children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and late husband whom she spent 64 years in marriage decorate her living room filled with memories to last a lifetime spanning more than a century. The family is counting down the days to celebrating her 104th birthday.

"She said she earned every one of those years," Kathleen said with a smile.

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