



TRISTAN LOREI, THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Bonnie Jean Greer Clark, who turns 100 next week, feeds her dog, Max, a treat at her home in Spotsylvania County on Wednesday. "There's not an animal that isn't a gift to us, and doggone it, we need to yell it, not say it," says Clark.

'The animals need our help'

Woman celebrating
100th birthday with
fundraiser for SPCA

CATHY DYSON
The Free Lance-Star

When family members asked Bonnie Clark what she'd like for her 100th birthday, she wanted the same thing that she's given

throughout her long and happy life: "Help for the animals!"

From her childhood on a wheat farm in Washington, where she raised Bantam chickens while her mother kept "a little canary named Billy," the woman who turns 100 next weekend — and adopted her latest shelter dog before Christmas — has been a fan of all things feathered and furry.

"I don't know how people can live without animals," she said, noting that she doesn't favor any one species but considers herself an animal person. "We gotta take care of the good Lord's gift to us and they are the best gift ever."

And so is, she thinks, the celebration her family has planned to honor her 100th — an online fundraiser for the Fredericksburg Regional SPCA. Clark and

her next-to-youngest child, Janet Clark, live together in a retirement villa in Spotsylvania County and have adopted several older dogs from the facility in recent years.

"Seniors for seniors," is how Janet Clark, 65, described the pets, some with medical problems, who spent their last days

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in their home. “We enjoyed their life until it ended.”

The campaign’s goal is to raise \$5,000. It’s available at fredspca.org and dedicating donations in honor of Bonnie Clark will help her family track the total.

“Of all the birthdays I’ve had,” she said, “I think this is the most meaningful. It has some purpose.”

A homesteading life

Bonnie Jean Greer Clark is old enough to remember the homesteading life her father talked about, when he came out West from Oklahoma to work the land. She lived through the Depression and World War II, gave birth to six Baby Boomers and worked on the business end of the Manhattan Project, research that produced the first atomic bombs.

But she doesn’t act, talk or move around like someone whose history goes back that far. When she and her two youngest children, Janet Clark and Laurie Webb, sat down for an interview, she was the one who filled in the names and dates when her daughters stumbled.

She fired them off as readily as her newest dog, Max, a mixed Shih Tzu, growled at visitors. He’s slightly over-protective — and vocal about it — especially when a photographer aimed a camera at his “Grandmama.”

“My siblings and I have to remind ourselves and not take for granted that Mom is almost 100 because of her energy and personality and ...” Webb paused, searching for the right word.

“My health?” her mother said, finishing the sentence for her. “I guess it’s that Scottish background. We’re pretty strong.”

Clark takes one pill a day, for blood pressure, and her hearing is good. Up until age 95, when she had a lung-related problem, she hadn’t been to a hospital since Webb was born 61 years earlier.

She’s soft-spoken and funny. When the women hear a rustling in the bedroom and discover mad Max is up on the dresser, Clark calls out: “Don’t let him eat the rouge.”

She doesn’t ramble about the past, or any topic, but speaks her



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Bonnie Jean Greer Clark smiles at her dog, Max, in her home in Spotsylvania.

mind with precision and conviction.

While work on her family’s wheat farm “was a killer” and never-ending, and people were “poor, totally poor,” there was a sense of community she valued.

“I miss that life. I miss the feeling that we all had of belonging to one another,” she said, remembering the way neighbors helped each other. “I don’t know what the world is now, I don’t recognize it.”

She fears it’s been lost to “these telephones you carry in your pocket and you talk to half the day.” She’s afraid that feeling of togetherness she knew as a youngster will disappear.

“I feel for you, I mourn for you because that will be lost,” she said, “that feeling of really being a part of this beautiful world of ours.”

A magnet for strays

Her daughters said Clark likes to talk to the animals and sometimes, they meow or bark back at her. One great conversationalist was a white cat named Mr. Earl,

one of many pets initially adopted by her children but later bequeathed to her.

“My brother left him with Mom in Florida and Mr. Earl was her absolute favorite,” Janet Clark said.

Clark and her late husband, Harold, retired to Florida after his retirement. The two met at a USO dance in Sacramento during World War II when he was a medic and on leave. When the war ended, his interest in medicine continued as he researched treatments for arthritis, both for people and animals.

The two were married for 65 years before his death in 2007.

“Dr. Harold W. Clark,” she said, wistfully reciting his full name and credentials. “I miss him.”

The two initially lived in Rochester, New York, with his family, then came south to Northern Virginia for his work at George Washington University.

That’s when more babies started to come, as well as cats and dogs.

“Our house (in Falls Church) was like a magnet for any stray

(pet) in the neighborhood,” said Webb, who lives in Fredericksburg.

There was Buffy, a white Samoyed, and Caesar, who once barked at a gas-meter reader who then hit the dog with a metal stick. Bonnie Clark heard the commotion and “took after him,” Webb recalled. The mother also filed a complaint against him with the company.

“People should be jailed, FOREVER, in my view, for harming animals,” Clark said. “It is unacceptable, no matter what.”

The couple owned a blueberry farm in south-central Pennsylvania, where the family spent most weekends and collected an even greater menagerie. The children played with ducks and rabbits which lived in elaborate pens built by their father.

When their mother took in whatever strays needed care, their dad would initially fuss that they didn’t have room for any more four-legged children. But he was the one who made sure the newest arrivals were comforted and well-fed.

“Most of the people in our family love animals,” Webb said.

Janet Clark’s daughter, Rachel, has several degrees on the subject including one in zookeeping, which may be a spinoff from her grandfather’s work.

Animals need help

Harold and Bonnie Clark visited a number of zoos in their day, both in the United States and abroad through his work as the research director at the Arthritis Institute in Arlington. He was part of a team that tested antibiotics and anti-inflammatory on large animals including elephants and great apes.

The institute’s work with Tomoka, the “star gorilla” at the National Zoo in Washington, was documented in an article by United Press International.

“Twelve years ago, Tomoka was a bag of bones at 90 pounds, crippled with arthritis, about to be put to sleep to end his agony,” according to the 1981 story. “Today, Tomoka is a robust 380 pounds, in the prime of life, bounding about like a teenager and a ‘very fine specimen of a gorilla,’ says the National Zoo’s Mike Morgan.”

The Clarks visited animal sanctuaries, established to care for wild animals people purchased, then realized they couldn’t handle. The attempt to tame creatures that belonged in the wild was one of Harold Clark’s pet peeves, his daughters said.

As a result of her husband’s work, Bonnie Clark said her concern for animals grew to include the largest on earth as well as some of the smallest, especially as she’s gotten older. She can’t even step on a spider; she tries to catch it and take it outside. She’s read too many stories, from the many wildlife agencies she supports, about animals losing their habitats.

“There’s not an animal that isn’t a gift to us, and doggone it, we need to yell it, not say it,” she said. “We’re pushing animals out and where are they going to go and where are they going to be fed? I am not going to be here too long so all I can do is yell. The animals need our help.”

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