

100 YEARS: Centenarian keeps the faith and stays positive

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Hearing the news of Zemko's birthday cancellation, friends decided to put together a birthday surprise that outdid anything Zemko could have imagined.

"How it would all come together was anybody's guess. It was a surprise," said her granddaughter, Lori Flanders. "I told her there's someone outside that wants to see you, and her dear friend Laurie Vanderbeek handed her flowers. Dr. Kevin Miller and his daughter drove by, too. Everybody had signs on their cars and balloons with birthday greetings. We maintained our social distancing through it all."

Zemko was overwhelmed with gratitude and amazement at how many people helped her celebrate.

"It was the most outstanding birthday that I've ever had," she said from her home outside Sisters, where she lives with Flanders and her husband.

"It was unbelievable," Zemko said, laughing. "I have never experienced anything like that in my life. I felt like a movie star! Friends showed up that I met since I moved here from Sisters, Redmond and Powell Butte. It just blew my mind; I was so shocked and so pleased to know that many people thought of me. I have flowers and cards still coming too. I've met some of the sweetest people since I moved in with my granddaughter seven years ago and have lived in Oregon for 40 years."

Zemko moved from Springfield, before that she lived in Southern California for a short time and was born in Oklahoma. She came to Oregon 40 years ago.

Zemko considers Central Oregon a little piece of heaven.

"Everyone's so good to me here," she said. "I couldn't be treated any better."

Her childhood in Oklahoma was full of hard work and lots of love. She grew up with seven siblings, four older and two younger, and they all picked cotton.

"We were sharecroppers and Dad was a blacksmith," she said.

Her family lived through the Dustbowl, the Depression and World War II.

"I remember my Mama hanging wet sheets over the windows to try and keep the dust from blowing in," she said recalling the Dustbowl. "We did everything we could to keep the sand out, but there was a cloud of dust coming."

Zemko says when she remembers her past, her memories are all good.

"I love everybody," she said.

Flanders says she admires her Nana and how she doesn't focus on the rough times.

"She remembers them but it's not her focus," Flanders said. "She celebrates the happy times."

Zemko knows God is in control and he's not ready for her yet.

"She's a woman of strong faith in good times and bad. It's been her relationship with Jesus Christ that has helped her have a journey where she didn't worry. She knew that God had a story for her, he knew it and he wrote it. She read the Bible to me when I was a little squirt and I'm almost 60," said Flanders. "That's what I think of when I think what has carried her through. She is a woman of prayer and prays morning, noon and night. She's a prayer warrior."

"I have had so many answered prayers. Living to 100 I've gotten to see them,"

said Zemko. "One is that I can still see."

She still does embroidery. She prayed that God would allow her to keep her sight so she could do artwork on her embroidery and support other people through letter writing.

Every week Zemko drinks a gallon of whole milk and eats biscuits and gravy, bacon and eggs for breakfast.

"And I still have my teeth, honey!" she chuckled.

Her favorite place in their home is in the living room and family room where she can look out and see the mountains: "They are absolutely beautiful, and I love the sun."

Flanders takes her grandmother into Sisters for outings.

"We like to go to Bi-Mart and eat at Takoda's," said Flanders. "That's her favorite stomping ground and she always gets their Marionberry cobbler. She also likes to go to Three Creeks Brewery."

The Sisters Movie House still amazes Zemko. She loves ordering her food and enjoying it while she watches a movie.

Zemko has friends all over the U.S. and keeps in touch with her best friend who lives in Springfield and is 103. They can't talk on the phone anymore, but she cherishes their friendship. One of Zemko's favorite activities is brightening other people's day. Until her 90s, she visited nursing homes and encouraged residents by spending time with them. Eight years ago, she stopped driving, so she writes three to 15 cards per week to whoever she can think of to bring a little joy into their day.

"It's a blessing to me to do it," she said.



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