

Being thankful for everything, every day

By LACEY HOYER
The Daily Astorian

Thursday my Grandma Ruth celebrated her 100th Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving, unfortunately, was always a bittersweet holiday for her, especially in her later years.

She spent many of them alone, unwilling to intrude on family members who lived far away, and unable to cook or host guests in her own small house.

My parents, sister and I spent most Thanksgivings with the other side of our family, and I always felt a pang of guilt thinking of my Grandma Ruth sitting alone with only the TV for company. She would wave away my concerns though, saying she was so grateful for her family every day, and didn't need a special holiday to remind her of it. "I'll see you tomorrow," she would say. "And maybe you could bring me some of that leftover pie?"

Born in 1915 to Swedish and Finnish immigrants, she has lived in the Astoria area her whole life; first in a little house on Alameda Avenue flanked by flowering plum trees, and now, finally, in a small room on the fourth floor of Clatsop Care Center.

When she started school in 1920, she spoke only Finnish and was soundly rapped on the knuckles with a ruler because of it. She remembers when horses and buggies were common on Commercial Street; she also remembers waking up one night in December 1922 and watching Commercial burn.

Widowed twice, she worked in the canneries, motels and the dairy to support her five children. She has beaten colon cancer, a broken hip, the loss of her eyesight and all of her teeth. She lived by herself until she was 93, stubbornly opposed to assistance until it was finally, absolutely, necessary.

As amazing as it has been, her 100 years has also taken its toll. Like many people her age, she suffers from a form of dementia. She is often confused, has lost all interest in the things she once enjoyed, and rarely recognizes the people she loved.

Growing up, she always told me we had a bond that could not be broken, and it never fails to break my heart when I realize she no longer remembers what made our connection so special. She has forgotten the countless days and nights we spent together, looking at old photos and going for walks. Caring for me as a newborn baby when my parents had to take my twin sister to the hospital for an extended stay. Shopping trips when I would take her arm to help her walk and we would chat and laugh as we perused the greeting card aisle. Birthday lunches, picnics at Fort Clatsop and Friday night sleepovers eating popcorn and watching Steve Urkel on the television.

She has forgotten all that. She has forgotten me.

Truthfully, it's hard to visit her now, especially on holidays, despite how much I love her. She's often asleep when I come, and when she's awake she asks questions about people I never knew, people who



Grandma Ruth and great-granddaughter Avery Hoyer.

Lacey Hoyer/The Daily Astorian



Grandma Ruth

died long before I was born. Even when I play along and make up answers or interesting pieces of news, she can only carry on a conversation for about a minute or two before she forgets everything that's been said. Before she looks at me with eyes the exact same shade of blue as mine and asks, "Now, how do I know you again?"

Yesterday was no different. We sat in the cafeteria and she patted my hand politely and thanked me when I told her I loved her. When I asked her what she was most thankful for in her 100th year, she smiled sweetly, like she always does, and dismissively waved her hand.



Writer's Notebook

I am so very thankful that she was granted the gift of a century.

"Oh, I'm thankful for everything," she said. "Every day."

She got tired soon after that, and I left and went on to my main, festive Thanksgiving dinner, feeling guilty to leave her. I thought of all the years gone by. I thought about how grateful I am that I can still remember what we meant to each other, even though she's no longer able to. How thankful I am for every time I opened the front door of her house and her eyes lit up to see me, and for every time she called just to say hello. I am grateful that she is still here, and I still have time to see her twinkling blue eyes and her gentle, beloved smile.

I am so very thankful that she was granted the gift of a century, and I was granted the gift of being her granddaughter.

So much can change in 100 years. So much can change in just the blink of an eye. Electric lights. Radios. Two world wars and countless others. Space travel. Cell phones. The soft hush of brain neurons as they inexplicably lose their connections.

But there are also things that never seem to change at all. Thanksgiving is still celebrated with turkey and stuffing, mashed potatoes and gravy. It is still a day to come together with the ones you love, to reflect on and to be thankful for all that you have, whatever you have, for however long you may have it.

And maybe today, if you're lucky, someone you love will stop by to share some of that leftover pie.

The wonderful gift of reading

By FRANK BRUNI
New York Times News Service

The list of what a child needs in order to flourish is short but nonnegotiable.

Food. Shelter. Play. Love.

Something else, too, and it's meted out in even less equal measure.

Words. A child needs a forest of words to wander through, a sea of words to splash in. A child needs to be read to, and a child needs to read.

Reading fuels the fires of intelligence and imagination, and if they don't blaze well before elementary school, a child's education — a child's life — may be an endless game of catch-up.

That's a truth at the core of the indispensable organization Reading Is Fundamental, a nonprofit group that provides hundreds of thousands of free books annually to children age 8 or younger, in particular those from economically disadvantaged homes, where books are a greater luxury and in shorter supply.

I shine a light on Reading Is Fundamental, or RIF, for several reasons.

We're in the midst of giving thanks, and this group deserves plenty. It has distributed more than 410 million books to more than 40 million American children.

We're on the cusp of the year-end holiday season, during which many people turn their attention to charity, making the most generous of their

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yearly donations. I urge everyone to think about literacy, books, early childhood education and organizations, like RIF, that support them.

And we're a texting, tweeting, distracted country in which too many children don't read at grade level, too many forces conspire against any improvement in that and too heavy a price is paid.

RIF just began its 50th year of work — it was born in November 1966 — and is marking that milestone with some new approaches and a fresh determination to spread its message despite budget challenges. With the clampdown on federal spending over recent years, it lost about \$24 million in annual funding that it had come to rely on. That represented more than two-thirds of its budget, which now leans harder on private contributions.

Consequently, RIF gives away fewer books in a given year than it once did. It was down to 1.8 million last year from a high of about 17 million more than a decade ago.

But RIF has signed on as a partner with ustyme — a digital platform that



Frank Bruni

enables multiple users to read or play video games together — to make sure that underprivileged children in particular take advantage of ustyme's Billion e-Book Gift, which will provide access to a digital library of 50 previously selected children's titles, many in Spanish as well as English. Those titles can be downloaded, starting Dec. 1, by visiting RIF.org/50ebooks.

The ebook reflects RIF's determination to get kids to read in whatever manner best accomplishes that. The goal is to develop a muscle, nurture a habit, maybe even spark a passion. You never know where a little reading might lead.

Ellen Halliday, the RIF coordinator for the Brooklyn Public Libraries, recalled a mother who worried that her 8-year-old son was wasting his time with easy, breezy, frivolous books.

"Then one day," Halliday told me, "when he was about 9 or 10, he said to me, 'You know, I got this book, and this author — I can really see what he's talking about when he talks about the shire or the hobbit. I think this Tolkien



Staff Sgt. Nichelle Anderson U.S. Air Force

Children receive books during a Reading is Fundamental event at the Youth Center on Joint Base Andrews, Md., in 2013. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar attended the event hosted by Joint Base Andrews and the RIF organization to help encourage and motivate children to become lifelong readers. Jabbar, author and the current leading scorer in the National Basketball Association's history, read to the children.

guy is an excellent author."

RIF was the brainchild of Margaret McNamara, whose experience as a teacher convinced her that for many poor kids, one of the main barriers to proficient reading was simply access to books.

The group became known for its Bookmobiles, trucks that pulled up to schoolhouses to dispense books the way a Good Humor or Mister Softee truck dispenses ice cream — only for free.

It's vital nourishment. Research suggests that during their earliest years, kids from disadvantaged homes don't hear as robust a variety of words as kids from privileged ones, and that's the prelude to a series of other gaps with bearing on their success in school and beyond.

Early reading is one of the remedies.

"Reading follows an upward spiral," said Daniel Willingham, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia and the author of "Raising Kids Who Read," which was published earlier this year.

"Kids who read more get better at reading, and because they are better at reading, it's easier and more pleasurable so they read still more," he said. "And kids who read well don't just do better in English class — it helps them in math, science and every other class, too."

I'd go even further. Reading tugs them outside of themselves, connecting them to a wider world and filling it with wonder. It's more than fundamental. It's transformative.



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