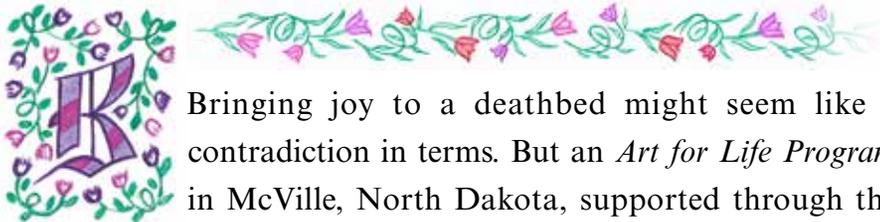


Waltzing with Gladys



Bringing joy to a deathbed might seem like a contradiction in terms. But an *Art for Life Program* in McVille, North Dakota, supported through the partnership of the North Dakota Council on the Arts, the Nelson County Arts Council, and the Nelson County Health System Care Center, helped to do just that.

Gladys (Elgin) Schmiginske had been in the Nelson County Health System Care Center for about five years, when she participated in a life-story writing activity in 2009 with Rita Loibl, the Nelson County Arts Council's local coordinator for the *Art for Life Program*. Rita edited stories that were collected through interviews with elder residents by traditional Norwegian-American storyteller Judith Simundson. The questions that Gladys couldn't answer during the interviews, her son, Harvey, certainly could.

Gladys, the daughter of Hans and Rena Elgin, grew up on a farm about ten miles south of McVille. After she married Raymond Schmiginske, they farmed with her parents and had four children: Harvey, Adeline, Phyllis, and Linda.

"We were always together," says Harvey. "She was my

mother, and whatever we did, we did it together."

When they fried bacon, for example, each would have a fork, and they turned the bacon together.

Harvey learned to bake from his mother and grandmother when he was a child, and he continues to bake and cater to this day. Some of his specialties include cookies, doughnuts, and *krumkake* (a Scandinavian, cone-shaped cookie), and they are sought after at local fundraisers.

Gladys and Harvey traveled a lot, to the Seattle World's Fair, to St. Louis to see the famous arch, to California to see their relatives. They often took the train, and when Harvey fell asleep, his mother would poke him and say, "Why travel with you? You sleep all the time. Let's play cards."

One day, after Rita finished editing Gladys' life story, she read the final draft to both Gladys and Harvey. "It was God's plan," says Rita. "She's living her life and Harvey is there hearing it and sharing it."

"The whole time she was reading, Ma gripped my hand real tight," Harvey says.

After Rita left the room, Gladys grabbed Harvey's hand and said, "Goodbye, Harvey. I love you."

It was the last gift of a lifelong relationship. Gladys passed away early the next morning at the age of ninety-six.

Art for Life Program activities help residents of elder care centers, their families, and the staff. Days in a nursing home don't change much, so any stimulation has to come from the outside. Rita cites other benefits of the *Art for Life Program*: One resident couldn't speak because of a stroke, but she would get very animated whenever there was music. She became more and more alert and started mouthing words to the songs and eventually she started speaking again.

As Rita put it, "The good Lord made her speak again."

The life-story writing activity that Gladys and Harvey participated in brought people into the nursing home who had never been there before. "It was good for them, too," says Rita.

Participating in that activity also helped prepare Rita for when her own mother went into a nursing home. "All this experience made that experience much more comfortable. In both cases, you learn compassion, and you become more familiar with the end-of-life stage."

Gladys' story from that life-story writing activity continues to help Harvey cope with his grief: "I still read that story from time to time." And it makes him feel better and reminds him of the really good life they shared together.

"It'll always be tough," says Harvey. "The grief will

always be there." when he thinks of Gladys, he still cries. "Love tears," he calls them.

Harvey thinks of Gladys especially when there is any old-time music playing, because music and dancing were two of Gladys' gifts to Harvey. Gladys loved to dance to old-time polkas, schottisches, or anything with an accordion. Many times she said, "Let's dance." When she couldn't dance on her feet anymore, she danced in her wheelchair, and one of the pieces of music played at her funeral was "Waltz Across Texas."

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