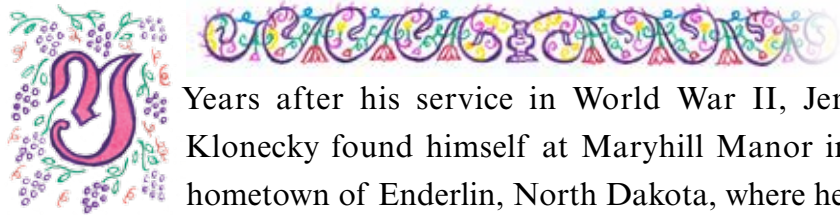


The Young Fellers



Years after his service in World War II, Jerome Klonecky found himself at Maryhill Manor in his hometown of Enderlin, North Dakota, where he was working on his goal of turning 100.

When Jerome heard there was an improv theater group coming to Maryhill, he was less than thrilled. He glanced at his recently made bed and decided to get back in it. Just as he was pulling the covers up around his neck, he heard a knock on his door.

“Yeah?” Jerome replied in what sounded more like a grunt. He didn’t want visitors today.

His friend Frank Egan and two high-school-age boys shuffled into his room.

“Jerome, what are you doing?” Frank asked.

“I’m sleeping!” Jerome replied, stating what he thought was obvious.

“Well, Ethan and Alex want you to come out.”

“Ah, I don’t wanna do improv.”

“Jerome, there’s women out there,” Frank said, knowing his friend all too well.

Jerome popped his eyes open and sat straight up in bed with a mischievous smile. The boys laughed, amused by their new improv partner’s interest in women. Maybe the three of them had more in common than they thought.

It was summer in Enderlin, and English teacher Terri Egan was running her theater class at Maryhill.

“The theater project was great for bringing different people together,” says Frank Egan, Terri’s husband, who would help out with the program. The improvisational clinic was made possible by the *Art for Life Program* and ran for one week. Students would perform different skits and encourage the residents to act with them.

Over the course of the week, through interviews and play-acting, Jerome shared his stories of being the rebel of Enderlin High School, his time in World War II, and, of course, his girlfriends.

And Jerome wasn’t the only one who had hesitated when he heard about the summer drama class.

“I actually thought it was going to be boring,” says Ethan, one of the high school boys who had shuffled into Jerome’s

room with Frank Egan. “I’m not usually the guy who does summer school. I’m usually working on an engine in the shop. But it was fun listening to all Jerome’s stories. He was a nice guy.”

Jerome’s storytelling was so good that Ethan and his friend Alex sometimes stayed after their drama class had already left for the day. The three of them would pass the time laughing, telling more stories, and giving each other a hard time.

Frank knew this friendly teasing was a great way to get to know Jerome: “He was one of those guys who are grumpy, but they’re grumpy until you give it right back to them. They kind of need that to break their shell. That was the way it was with Jerome.”

The boys were happy to joke around with Jerome, and soon the theater class didn’t really feel like summer school at all. Instead, they were just getting to know a new friend.

They learned that in 1942, Jerome joined the Army’s anti-aircraft artillery. Jerome also spoke about his travels during World War II. Various missions brought his unit to Iceland, England, France, Belgium, and Germany. In Belgium, his crew shot down a German bomber that was attempting to attack either Antwerp or Brussels. At the end of his service, Jerome’s unit was honored with campaign ribbons which proudly displayed five battle stars.

After the war, Jerome went to work on the Soo Line

Railroad as a dispatch operator and worked closely with Frank’s father. He stayed with Soo Line until he retired in his seventies.

As the stories unfolded, Jerome and his boys formed an unlikely connection. Ethan and Alex even visited Jerome a few more times after the summer theater program ended.

Terri Egan noticed this sort of a bond was a common occurrence with her students and the elders over the years: “Throughout our visits there, I saw such wonderful reactions and a sense of play from the adults that made the [theater class] a very special one for my students. Each day we would finish with a journal and discussion about what [the students] had noticed, and it was clear that their perceptions about the elderly and nursing homes underwent a significant change. They began to see their partners as colleagues and allies. I felt that was the most successful part of this venture.”

Whether it’s drama, painting, or writing, art has a magical way of compelling people to share a part of themselves. Personal stories begin to emerge and people have a chance to be heard. Art can be just the catalyst that’s needed to tell our stories in a world that sometimes doesn’t seem to be listening. The theater program turned out to be just what Jerome and the boys needed.

“The effect it had on Jerome, the fact that in his very last days he felt truly loved by his kids and had a connection with them . . . that’s invaluable,” explains Myrene Peterson,

Enderlin's Librarian and *Art for Life Program* representative.

Four months after their friendship first began, and just five years shy of his goal, Jerome passed away. When the boys heard of Jerome's passing, they asked Mrs. Egan if they could miss school to attend his funeral. She agreed without hesitation and was touched by her students' compassion.

"We wanted to pay our respects. He was a really nice old guy and was fun to be around. There were a lot of people there, but we were the youngest ones. 'The young fellers,' that's what he used to call us," remembers Ethan.

If it weren't for the *Art for Life Program* and Mrs. Egan's theater program, these boys would've never had the opportunity to see past Jerome's rough exterior. Instead of being a grumpy old man they may have passed on the street, he became a decorated war veteran, a quick-witted ladies' man, and, more than anything, a good friend.

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Lauren is a writer and storyteller who earned a Bachelor of Arts in English from St. Olaf College. She is currently working as a communications consultant for SURVIVEiT, a nonprofit that provides online resources for cancer patients. She also mentors elementary children in an after-school program for New Americans. In her free time, she enjoys volunteering as a writer and copy editor for the *High Plains Reader*, as well teaching creative writing at the YWCA in Fargo, North Dakota. She lives in Moorhead, Minnesota, with her husband Jamison, Kingsley the black lab, and LeBron the cat.

