

Home » News » Local News



8:43 am - September 23, 2013 — Updated: 8:43 am - September 23, 2013

Hilo nonagenarian spreads wisdom

By COLIN M. STEWART

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Joseph "Jai" Kerr, a 49-year-old Hilo-based health food business owner, says he had been obsessing recently about turning 50.

"It was on my mind," he said. "I worried I was over the hill. ... Then I talked to her, and she set me straight."

The woman he spoke of was nonagenarian Mary Pappalardo. A native of New York City, Pappalardo visits Hilo semi-regularly to stay with her daughter, Jean Prem. Earlier this week, Pappalardo was reading a book in Kalakaua Park when her path crossed Kerr's, and the pair shared an enlightening conversation that helped Kerr realize that he's got a long way to go, and much to learn.

"We talked for hours, under the Banyan tree, and I didn't even feel the time passing. I was mesmerized," he said Wednesday. "She was telling me about her life, growing up in the Great Depression, World War II. I mean, she had seen and done so much. It made me appreciate all I have in my life. I have so much left to do."

Pappalardo puts it a little more succinctly.

"You're just a baby," she said Friday, as the two met again under the same tree, a day after she celebrated her 96th birthday.

Born in New York City — she still remembers the street address in Harlem — Pappalardo was one of nine siblings, the daughter of an Italian immigrant who represented his fellow Italians in labor unions and translated for those who couldn't speak English.

"People always ask me what it was like, growing up in the Depression. And they may not believe me, but I loved it," she said. "I'm so thankful I grew up during the Depression. We had the most wonderful childhood years."

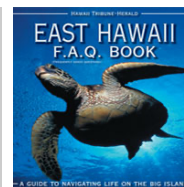
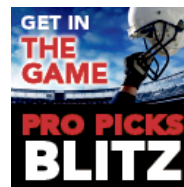
Perhaps the most important difference between those days and now is the fact that families spent time together around the dinner table, she explained.

"For one thing, we always got rid of the leftovers," she said, laughing. "But really, we cherished the table. Everybody stayed around the table. My brother Louie would get out his mandolin and my brothers would sing three-part harmony. ... We shared stories with each other."

Nowadays, families and children seem to be too preoccupied with their cell phones, she observed, even though computers and the Internet have made life easier in some very obvious ways.

"I have witnessed so many wonderful things, like radio and television and the Internet. It's amazing. It used to take forever to borrow money from a bank. Now, you can give someone an account number on the phone, and they punch it in and they have all your information in front of them. It's amazing. Everything's speeded up. ... But what it does to the family, I don't like. That's the part I'm not in favor of."

As a young woman, one day long before World War II erupted, Pappalardo went to her mother and told her that it was her dream to be a teacher. She had already earned a full scholarship and was



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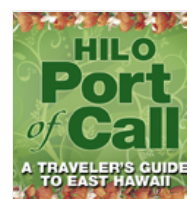
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looking forward to attending school to get a teaching degree.

But as the youngest child, Pappalardo's mother said it was her duty to stay close to home and help the family. So she put her dreams on the back burner, and became a wife and mother, instead. Her husband Sal, who would later serve his country in WWII, was supportive of her desire to teach, but Pappalardo said she felt leaving wouldn't be fair to her children, so she stayed home and raised them — all six of them.

She now has 19 grandkids and 23 great-grandchildren. As an aside, she noted that she recently undertook a project to paint and frame pictures for each of her great-grandchildren.

"I have 23 great-grandkids, but I painted 24. ... It's good to be prepared," she said.

As her children got older, Pappalardo again picked up her dream of teaching and began attending school. It took her eight years to finish her degree while balancing that work with family obligations, such as handling the bookkeeping duties for her husband's business, but at 54, she graduated.

There was only one problem, she said.

"I think they all thought I was too old. They kept asking me 'Are you sure you know what you're getting into. Are you sure you want this?'"

"That was when I started coloring my hair," she said, pointing to her enhanced auburn coif. "And I've been doing it ever since."

It took four more years, but she eventually got a job teaching, and loved every minute of it, she said.

"Even when I had to discipline the kids, and I'd be worried they would be mad, the next day the kids would come in and give me cupcakes and flowers," she said. "I've always loved children."

She retired several years later, but still takes time to impart the wisdom she's gained over the years to younger people, like she did in her conversation with Kerr.

"I just like to talk with young people. I like to help," she said.

While much of the wisdom she shares may not be entirely original — she's often heard reminding people not to try to be something they're not, or telling people not to dwell on the negative aspects of things — when Pappalardo tells people something, it's clear she's speaking with experience, and it's harder to dismiss what she's saying.

That may explain why so many people ask her the secret to her longevity.

"I always get asked that," she said. "Here's what I say. OK. All you young people need to start the day with a walk. I walk a mile, or a mile-and-a-half sometimes. I like to get out early in the morning, see what I see, and while I'm on my walks, I communicate with God. We have the most interesting conversations — he never talks back."

Additionally, she has a bowl of oatmeal in the morning, a lunch of yogurt and fruit, and for supper a little red meat and vegetables, and 6 ounces of red wine.

"I try to balance," she said.

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