

EDITOR'S JOURNAL



Ninety-Two and Still Laughing

My favorite aunt, Donna Jean Patin, celebrated ninety-two years on August 11th. My wife and I arrived in Atlanta for a visit just sixteen days too late to witness the landmark birthday, but when she met us at the door with that ageless smile, we knew the celebration wasn't over. Even after open-heart surgery six years ago, she's still the picture of health, is living on her own, still driving and working one day a week. The wide-eyed curiosity and the infectious, easy laugh that I remember from almost five decades ago are still there.

Donna is my late mother's younger sister, and I have always thought of her as my second mother, or as my wife refers to a close and very special older friend, as my *mother of the heart*. She was more hip and spirited than my mother, always tuned in to life, love and people, and curious about the world. She loved to dance, and in her younger days, tap-danced in skates on top of a wooden drum for a school performance. Although her legs aren't quite as stable as they used to be—and in spite of her age—that same dancing spirit lives in her still.

During my days as a sailor stationed at Cheatham Annex, Williamsburg, we got off work at noon on Fridays, and I struck out on the highway, hitchhiking to Atlanta in twelve hours to spend the weekend with her, Uncle Smitty and my cousins. I typically arrived around midnight, called from a pay phone, and she or my uncle would pick me up—and although I was road weary, Donna and I would sit up at the kitchen table talking until the wee hours. Looking back, I'm

sure she heard more from her twenty-something nephew than any aunt wanted to hear, but she always seemed on the edge of her seat, curious to hear about the military world, my latest girlfriend or my dreams of big city life. Sunday afternoon, the family would put me out on the shoulder of I-85 in my navy uniform and wait in the car until I thumbed a ride, Donna's teary-eyed face looking through the windshield.

For me, those weekend visits were like a balm to my spirit, one of those steadfast memories that will always be there, and Donna is right at the center. She was and still is the embodiment of a life well lived—independent, wise, good spirited, loved and respected by her family, and graceful in her later years.

During the three days of our visit, we were treated to the classic breakfast she cooks for herself every morning—scrambled eggs (with a touch of garlic and sour cream), crispy bacon, grits, the most incredible toast you've ever crunched, and strawberries. And then she shared a secret: she always has frozen yogurt after breakfast. And so, to help keep the tradition alive, we sat on her back porch in the morning sun and had butter pecan frozen yogurt in a sugar cone. Happy birthday, Aunt Donna! *pl*

Top photo (left)—Aunt Donna and yours truly in 1949. Birthday girl (center); Donna, myself and my wife, Tanya (right).

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