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Lifestyles

Looking back on a life well lived



New horizon

Jackie Hayes

"Like a Dresden lady, never growing old. Time has lightly touched her with a wand of gold."

This is how May Sparks Dyer describes her friend Duretta Wolfard in a poem included in Duretta's book, *The Yesteryears*, which was published in 1989 when she was 90.

It is an accurate description. Today, nearing 94, she is a petite, well-groomed lady with a warm personality, in touch with the past but also acutely attuned to the future — a well-chosen representative of Kitchener-Waterloo senior women. She gained this distinction last month at the 18th annual Oktoberfest Women of the Year award presentations.

Duretta was born in Duluth, Wisc., Jan. 1, 1899. Her parents moved to Owen Sound in 1901 where she lived until 1912 when her father, J. B. Leslie, joined two bankers, Harold and Ed Gould, to form Gould Leslie Advertising with branches in Berlin (now Kitchener), Brantford and St. Catharines. They sold billboard advertising, winning national and international awards, and also door-to-door advertising. The firm still operates as Gould Advertising.

"I guess they were the forerunners of those awful flyers we get in the mail today," Duretta said.

She stayed behind in Owen Sound with her grandparents to finish her schooling, but developed pain in her leg and hip which was diagnosed as a tubercular hip that could have required strapping her leg to a board for six months and leaving her with a limp.

A Berlin doctor decided instead to treat her for rheumatoid arthritis by painting her leg with iodine. It took off several layers of skin, but she was cured and has never had a problem since.

In fact, her health has been excellent. She drove her own car until three years ago.

"Then I felt my reflexes weren't so good and the traffic was getting terrible," she said. "I missed driving at first. You lose your independence."

After a cataract operation two years ago, she lost some of her depth perception and has had a few falls, so her children take her shopping or wherever she wants to go. Fortunately, she is able to see well enough to continue her interest in painting.

"It's wonderful to have a hobby when you grow old," she remarked.

At 15, Duretta went to work for Florence Lowes to learn the millinery business. After apprenticing for two seasons, she designed and custom-made hats for women in the area for the grand salary of \$1 a week. Seeking to better her fortunes, she moved to Goudies department store to work in the office.

"The store was open Monday until Friday until 6 p.m. and on Saturday it remained open until there was no one left on the street," she recalled in an interview with Ryan Taylor which is on tape in the Grace Schmidt Room at the Kitchener library. "My boyfriend (Harry Wolfard) used to stand across the street waiting for Arthur Goudie to pull the blinds down, after which I had to balance the cash and type up a report."

Rather than jeopardize her romance, she found new employment with the Bank of Toronto as a savings teller. There were few women working in banks then.

"They put me in a metal cage. I felt like an animal," she said with a laugh.

Life was a lot of fun then. She met Harry at a Catholic Youth Organization dance at St. Mary's Hall where young people of all religions congregated. She became president of the Laf Lot Club, a group of young women who tented during the summer at Chicopee (with a married couple as chaperones) and commuted by street car to work. A highlight of the year was the Laf Lot versus Fat Men's hockey game at the old auditorium on Queen Street South. It was a sellout, with the money going to the Red Cross. They also held dances at the Bridgeport Casino (now Golf's Steak House).

"We didn't have movies and television. We made our own fun and everyone came out when something was going on."

She resigned from Laf Lot to marry Harry in 1919 in a quiet family ceremony at home. She remembers her wedding hat, a beige Breton sailor with full veil and ostrich plume.

"The veil was a nuisance. I had a cold and had to unfasten it every time I blew my nose," she said.

Harry's career with Merchants Rubber took him as a manager to Elmira and then as a vice-president to head office in Montreal with the parent company, Dominion Rubber. A five-year assignment stretched to 20. After retirement, they moved back to Waterloo to be



Duretta Wolfard of Waterloo has enjoyed painting since her first art class at age 47.

Rick Koza, Record staff

near their children, Bill and Leslie, and grandchildren. Harry died 10 years ago.

Duretta still lives in the spacious home they built backing on Westmount Golf Club, and tends the flowers in a garden along a raised stone wall. She wears a Lifeline alarm button for security, although she has never needed to use it.

She has seen a lot of changes in her lifetime. When her daughter was married during the war, a reception was held at the Rumpel estate, with a sit-down chicken dinner for 100 guests catered by Ken Hess, who later became chef at the Granite Club.

"I found the bill many years later and showed it to Ken when he catered a party for us. It was for \$69.50, plus \$1 for a room to change in," she said.

In 1989, after her first husband died, daughter Leslie married widower Ray Fowler and asked her mother to attend her.

"Imagine me, a bridesmaid at 90!" Duretta said. "It was a proud moment."

Duretta was active with Queen Anne IODE during her younger days and remembers making survival suits for the navy during the Second World War.

"They moved three commercial sewing machines into a church basement and about 30 IODE members worked afternoon and evenings sewing them together. Later, we assembled gas masks and packed them for shipping overseas. The money we were paid went to the Red Cross."

She became so good at fixing small problems with the machines that when she moved to Montreal, she did volunteer work as a maintenance person and troubleshooter for the Red Cross.

"I couldn't fix a tea kettle today," she confessed.

"Looking back at those two world wars — it wasn't a normal life."

She likes to keep her hands busy.

"Cross-stitching, basket-weaving, jewelry, metalcraft — whatever people were doing, I did. When all else fails, I read," she said.

When she was designing wall ornaments in tin, her husband jokingly complained that he had to eat whatever food was canned in the tins she needed.

At 47, she joined a friend in taking art lessons at a Montreal convent and one of her first charcoal drawings still hangs in her home.

"I was very nervous the first day," Duretta said. "I had never been with nuns and never held a piece of charcoal in my hands. Those sisters were simply wonderful teachers."

She painted in oils then, but now uses water colors which "are easier to work with, though more difficult to rectify if you make an error."

Each Christmas, she delights her friends with a personal hand-painted card and greeting, and many of her paintings have been sold to raise funds for charity, particularly the Working Centre.

She readily takes pen in hand to comment on current issues (such as proposed sculptures for Kitchener's new city hall), and likes to jot down her memories, which her daughter-in-law persuaded her to put in book form. Copies of *Yesteryears* are in the Kitchener, Waterloo and Owen Sound libraries, and she is now working on a second book.

She looks out the window at a pleasant fall scene and says contentedly that despite its ups and downs, life is good.

This column by Kitchener writer Jackie Hayes appears Fridays.