

GIVE THANKS



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Opinion

At 114 years old, Emma Otis knew a thing or two about the secrets of life

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Emma Otis, left, and Stefanie Ellis, in 2012 on Otis' 112th birthday (Picasa)

Want to live to 100? Spend more time outdoors, love one another and drink lots of milk.By [Stefanie Ellis](#)*Special to The Times*

MAYBE it sounds a little cheesy to say I loved a 114-year-old woman whom I met only twice, but it's true.

I work for the Girl Scouts. The supercentenarian whose smile is draped across my heart like a well-worn sash was our country's oldest living Girl Scout. Emma Otis, who also held the title of the oldest Washingtonian, died in her sleep Oct. 25 just three days after she officially became the second oldest person in the country and 10th oldest person in the world. When they found her, she was holding a Girl Scout doll.

If you sleep with a Girl Scout doll you've had for more than nine decades, you probably managed to soak up a lot of Girl Scout honor. In fact, you likely invented the term. Emma saw our organization in its infancy, and dedicated her life to introducing girls to powerful leadership and confidence-building opportunities that weren't widely available at the time. She also helped found in Belfair 80 years ago one of our most beloved camps.

Truly, it was impossible not to instantly love this woman. I first met her in 2012, when she was a spry 110-year-old in pink pants. Her hair was sprinkled in baby's breath and her voice was both tiny and big, excited and frustrated, pouring out of her throat in cracked prepubescent crescendos and timid whispers. She was like a sweet, wrinkled child, peering up at me through glasses nearly as big as her face. "Everything about Girl Scouts makes me so happy!" she said, clapping. "Everything!"

During my visit, she danced with Jamie, one of the caregivers at her Poulsbo senior living facility. She had a mad crush on him, and he didn't seem to mind the constant hand holding and googly eyes she made.

When we celebrated her 112th birthday together, she refused to use a cane or a wheelchair.

When I presented her with a Girl Scout blanket, her family snapped a photo of us together. I was kneeling beside Emma's chair, and she took my hands in hers. "They're so cold!" she exclaimed, rubbing her soft, weathered palms against mine. Then she looked me straight in the eyes and said, "I love you."

I couldn't stop the tears.

Now, though, a few days after her passing, I'm celebrating a woman who dedicated her life to service, education and savoring life. I'm raising a cookie in her honor, to go along with my glass of whole milk, which was the secret sauce for Emma's feistiness and impeccable health. She drank a glass every day.

That impeccable health allowed her to climb many mountains, visit every state and ride a camel in Egypt at age 69.

Emma helped establish our state bird — the American Goldfinch — in 1951, and spent her lifetime giving to others by volunteering at organizations dedicated to leadership, youth empowerment and the outdoors.

We're at a pivotal moment in history when those who have seen and experienced the world in a way most of us never will are disappearing. This means valuable advice, wisdom and ideas for a simpler way of living are disappearing with them.

Instead of getting buried in our tablets and iPhones, I think Emma would want us to get out in nature and into the world to see what we can learn.

I believe the driving force behind her desire to establish Girl Scout Camp St. Albans was the driving force for her entire life. "I knew I had to have a camp there," she said. "There was such lovely land everywhere. I said, 'I want that!'"

Emma Otis knew what she wanted, and seized every moment and experience she could. I think she'd want us all to do the same.

She would probably also want everyone to love each other. There is nothing cheesy about it, really, and Emma proved just how easy it is. You take someone's hands in yours, and your heart does the rest.

Stefanie Ellis is the public-relations director for Girl Scouts of Western Washington, a freelance writer and trained pastry chef who lives in Seattle.

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