A resilient spirit

“It’s a matter of what one sees,” explains Lafayette Noda as he prunes his blueberry bushes. “I’ll just try to take advantage of the . . . growth of the plant, try to anticipate what the plant may do in the future, try to help that along.”

Working with 93-year-old Noda are his daughter, Kesaya (pronounced “KES-sa”); her husband, Christopher; and Lafayette’s 86-year-old brother, Grant, who is visiting from California. Pruning the 1,600 blueberry bushes adjacent to the Noda farmhouse takes many hands and several weekends of work every spring.

“Blueberries, with care, will produce indefinitely,” Lafayette says. Two blueberry bushes near the house were full-grown when he and his wife moved there in 1957, and they’re still producing. Kesaya claims those berries are the tastiest. “They’re old, native [bushes],” Lafayette explains. “They’re still vigorous. One might guess that they are approaching 100 years.”

The parallels between the aging of his blueberry bushes and his own aging are not lost on Noda, a professor emeritus of biochemistry at DMS. “There is something about pruning and aging, huh?” he says with a smile. “Kind of a philosophical aspect, huh?”

But when one tries to probe deeper into what Noda thinks about aging, or about being 93, he doesn’t get a lot more profound, at least in words. “I don’t think 93, a 93rd birthday, means anything,” he says. “It’s just another day, another month, another year. . . . I just don’t think of it as being so different and exceptional. It comes along one day at a time.” He pauses and chuckles.

But statistically speaking, being 93 is exceptional. Life expectancy for males born today in the U.S. is about 75 years. When Noda was born in 1916, life expectancy for U.S. males was about 50. But it’s not simply the number of years that makes Lafayette Noda’s life exceptional—it’s all that he has experienced in his 93 years and the inner fortitude with which he has faced those experiences.

The fourth of nine children born to Japanese immigrants, Noda grew up on his family’s grape farm in rural California. “He was really the golden guy in that community,” says Kesaya of her dad, “because he had so much drive. Oh, my god, my dad had drive!” For example, Noda was a Boy Scout; became an Eagle Scout, the highest rank; then achieved Bronze Palm status, which required an additional five merit badges. “It was a huge deal,” Kesaya explains. “HUUUGE!” Lafayette was also valedictorian of his high school class.

“I have to admit that I did try to work hard . . . please the parents,” says Lafayette. His parents expressed their high hopes for their four sons by naming them after important figures in American history: Andrew, the oldest, for Andrew Jackson; Lafayette for Marquis de Lafayette; Patrick for Patrick Henry; and Grant for Ulysses Grant. (Only one of their five daughters received a historical name, however: Harriet, the youngest, was named for Harriet Beecher Stowe.)

Lafayette did go on to please his parents and to become a kind of hometown hero. He earned an
Sowing support and guidance

Dartmouth-Hitchcock—like most medical centers nationwide—is preparing for an onslaught of older patients as a result of the aging of the Baby Boomer population. In 1940, only 6% of the U.S. population was 65 or older. A half-century later, in 1990, 15% of Americans were 65 or older and 2% were 80 or older (that was the first year the Census Bureau reported on this latter group, often called “the oldest old”). By 2030, those percentages are projected to rise to 23% and 6%.

By 2030, those percentages are projected to rise to 23% and 6%.

It’s not entirely free of the burdens of aging. The past few years have been particularly difficult. In 2007, his wife of 60 years died unexpectedly. Now, 27 years into retirement, Noda still does much of the work on the farm himself. Barbed wire is not entirely free from the burdens of aging. The past few years have been particularly difficult. In 2007, his wife of 60 years died unexpectedly. Now, 27 years into retirement, Noda still does much of the work on the farm himself. Barbed wire is not entirely free from the burdens of aging. The past few years have been particularly difficult. In 2007, his wife of 60 years died unexpectedly. Now, 27 years into retirement, Noda still does much of the work on the farm himself. Barbed wire is not entirely free from the burdens of aging. The past few years have been particularly difficult. In 2007, his wife of 60 years died unexpectedly. Now, 27 years into retirement, Noda still does much of the work on the farm himself. Barbed wire is not entirely free from the burdens of aging. The past few years have been particularly difficult. In 2007, his wife of 60 years died unexpectedly. Now, 27 years into retirement, Noda still does much of the work on the farm himself. Barbed wire is not entirely free from the burdens of aging. The past few years have been particularly difficult. In 2007, his wife of 60 years died unexpectedly. Now, 27 years into retirement, Noda still does much of the work on the farm himself. Barbed wire is not entirely free from the burdens of aging. The past few years have been particularly difficult. In 2007, his wife of 60 years died unexpectedly. Now, 27 years into retirement, Noda still does much of the work on the farm himself. Barbed wire is not entirely free from the burdens of aging. The past few years have been particularly difficult. In 2007, his wife of 60 years died unexpectedly. Now, 27 years into retirement, Noda still does much of the work on the farm himself. Barbed wire is not entirely free from the burdens of aging. The past few years have been particularly difficult. In 2007, his wife of 60 years died unexpectedly. Now, 27 years into retirement, Noda still does much of the work on the farm himself. Barbed wire is not entirely free from the burdens of aging.

Whether it be the truth about blueberries, about history, or about himself, Kesaya argues that he is still a scientist through and through. He is the kind of person who can barely finish telling the story without becoming emotional. “It’s so difficult to hear the stories,” he says. “I love that about him. He’s emotionally amenable.”

Research

Hosts free elder-care discussion groups.

Edison "Lafayette" Noda, who died of pneumonia in 2007, is remembered by his daughter, Kesaya, for being a man who was never afraid to voice his opinion. Kesaya explains. “Since he has assessed them as unimportant, it’s okay to do what he is doing.”
Sheila Tanzer has faced her share of difficulties, including a daughter’s diagnosis with schizophrenia, her first husband’s death from Alzheimer’s, and her second husband’s death in 2003. Yet, at age 81, she maintains a positive attitude—a trait experts consider key to aging well. For a list of such traits, see page 61.

Tanzer found that by focusing on her inner freedom to choose her attitude, she was able to continue caring for her husband for the next seven years and accept his decline and death.

A positive attitude

Sheila Tanzer is not only willing but eager to talk about the aging process. At age 81, she reflects deeply on the hard inner work of aging well. “I have worked at this,” says Tanzer of the positive attitude she’s managed to maintain in the face of life’s hardships. For her, she says, that work is “daily prayer. And it’s reading. And it’s an effort to stay off that slippery slope of saying, ‘Oh, I just feel so sorry for myself.’ To me that’s just a trap.”

It would be understandable if Tanzer fell into that “trap,” as she calls it. Throughout her life, she has had to face adversities: the diagnosis and ongoing complications of a daughter’s schizophrenia, the premature and tragic death of her first husband from Alzheimer’s, the death of her second husband, and other heartaches besides.

Tanzer’s first husband, Lawrence Harvey, was an accomplished professor of French and Italian at Dartmouth. She and “Larry,” as she refers to him, moved to Hanover in 1955 and had “such a happy 26 years here,” she recalls. The couple and their four children lived abroad for three of those 26 years, when Larry Harvey won a Guggenheim Fellowship. Before Tanzer married Harvey, she had been accepted to and planned to enter a graduate program at Radcliffe. (She already had an undergraduate degree in English from the University of Wisconsin.) But after getting married, she abandoned her career aspirations and decided to be a stay-at-home mother. “I loved it,” she recalls. “That’s what I felt called to do.”

In fact, Tanzer has always tried to stay in touch with what she feels called to do. “What am I meant to do?” is a question she has found “so useful” throughout her life, she says. Three decades ago, that calling was taking care of Larry.

He was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s in 1980, at the age of 55. Seven years earlier, one of their daughters had been diagnosed with schizophrenia after a mental breakdown during her freshman year in college. Her twin sister then dropped out of college for three years, to work through her own depression, brought on by her sister’s diagnosis. So when Tanzer’s husband was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, she “felt doubly—even triply—defensive . . . determined to keep yet another trauma from invading” her family, she wrote in a feature published in Dartmouth Medicine in 1995.

“In the early stages of Alzheimer’s,” Tanzer wrote, “he exuberant self—sitting across the breakfast table each morning—looked reassuringly the same. Yet he who had always been meticulously organized began to lose his keys or forget appointments or misplace important files.” Once he walked home from work, because he forgot where he had parked his car. “He joked about it, saying that only an absent-minded professor could possibly misplace something that big.”

But it was far from a laughing matter when in the following year he got lost in an Italian town . . . [after he went around the side of a church] to take some photographs. I stood in the open piazza and waited. And waited . . . . An hour later, he pulled up in a van, looking pale and bewildered, accompanied by two Italian policemen. He had lost his way back to the piazza, he explained.”

Tanzer wrote of feeling trapped as her husband’s illness grew worse. “Paradoxically, it was then—when I felt most severely confined—that I recalled a passage about freedom in a book my husband and I had read aloud to each other in 1975, during an automobile trip to visit our daughter in a Connecticut psychiatric hospital.”

The passage was from a book called Man’s Search for Meaning by Viktor Frankl, a Viennese psychotherapist who had been imprisoned at Auschwitz. Frankl wrote that “the last of human freedoms,” the freedom that cannot be taken away, is the ability “to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances.” Tanzer found that by focusing on her inner freedom to choose her attitude—her outlook each day—she was able to continue caring for her husband for the next seven years and accept his decline and eventual death.

“The freedom to choose one’s attitude. Acceptance. Asking ‘what am I meant to do?’ These are the guideposts that Tanzer uses to keep her inner self on track. And the thought that she might have thought would attract these two,” says Tanzer of her parents. Her mother was from a Protestant family in the Deep South. Her father was from a large Irish Catholic family in the North. They married over protests from both families.
Cultivating an optimistic outlook

A

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Letters
continued from page 25
list. Out of the flood of magazines that I receive, yours is one of the very best.

Donald R. Hart, Jr.
Salisbury, Conn.

Appetite for history

I read with great interest the article by Dr. Lee Witters in the Winter 2008 issue (“Diabetes Detectives”—see dartmed.dartmouth.edu/w08

Dr. Witters wrote the article and it whetted my appetite even more. Thank you for publishing a very interesting read.

ARIE VITALI, M.D. DMS ’94
LaBock, Tex.

DHART on board

I enjoyed the article about the rollover inci-

dent on I-91 and the DHART response to it (“Help from on High”—see dartmed.dartmouth.edu/w08). I posted it on the bulletin board at the KIllington, Vt. Firehouse because Alf Rylander, who figures prominently in the story, was our first-responder instructor for several years. We’re proud to have been associated with him. I also sent a copy of the article to his daughter, who is a Blackjack medevac pilot with the Vermont Army National Guard.

Thank you for the great article.

DEBBIE BURKE Killington, Vt.

Reading matter

My husband and I would like to be placed on the mailing list to receive your magazine. Our granddaughter has been diagnosed with cancer at Dartmouth for the last year, and I have read your many informative articles during our long visits. Thank you.

RICHARDS AND DONNA MOORE Clifton, N.H.

We are happy to place on our mailing list any one who’s interested in the subjects that we cov- er. See the box on page 25 for details.

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Summer Hardy

continued from page 45

“Out of all this background comes the gift of their love,” says Tanzer, “which was built on this ideal, that even if their families were going to take this strong stand and not be able to understand, that they knew that this was a very true love. That’s the kind of love that we breathed growing up. They respected each other’s differences, especially in religion. . . . We went to church with my father. It was hard for my mother, but she never complained about it. She went alone to her church.

Tanner is grateful to have found true love and companionship, like her parents had, not once but twice. Sheils married Raffold Tanzer, a legendary plastic surgeon* at Dartmouth, in 1995; only months after meeting him at a friend’s house. He was 89 and she was 67.

“Our decision elicited amazement from most of our friends,” Sheila wrote in another letter to Dartmouth Medicine, in 2004. “Some of them had reservations because of the difference in our ages. . . . But our joint willingness to take a leap of faith was based on a rapport we discovered soon after our initial meeting—a harmony of souls that quickly deepened into devoted love,”

Hardy Stock

* Radford Tanzer was incorrectly described as an ear, nose, and throat surgeon in the print edition of this issue.