At 115, oldest living American stays lively and active

Jeralean Talley, who at 115 is believed to be the oldest person in the U.S., was honored with a service at New Jerusalem Missionary Baptist Church in Inkster, Mich., on Sunday, May 25, 2014. Detroit Free Press

Robin Erb, Detroit Free Press 3:02 p.m. EDT May 26, 2014



INKSTER, Mich. - The secret to long life? The key to happiness?

At 115 years old — <u>believed to be the oldest person in the U.S. (http://www.freep.com/article/20140526</u> /NEWS06/305260021/oldest-person-in-America-church-birthday-celebration) — Jeralean Talley is wise enough to know that perhaps no one can know for sure.

(Photo: Jarrad Henderson, Detroit Free Press) Live. Love. Know God.

Trust His will.

It is a lifelong conversation with the Good Lord that brought her to this place, she said as church service got under way Sunday at New Jerusalem Missionary Baptist Church in Inkster, Mich. — a service, in part, to honor her.

"I asked Him, I said, 'You know my will and this is your will.' ... And so far my prayers have been answered and I'm satisfied," said the Inkster resident.

STORY: Oldest living American turns 115 (/story/news/nation/2014/05/23/oldest-living-american-turns-115/9470209/) MORE: Oldest living American celebrates 114th birthday (/story/news/2013/05/23/oldest-living-american-celebrates-114th-birthday/2354909/)

Outside the church office where she sat, well-wishers signed cards and her daughter, 76-year-old Thelma Holloway, and family greeted loved ones, many who carried in flowers for her.

She stood.

Her family coaxed the supra-centenarian toward the hallway where a packed sanctuary awaited, Tal of the steps.

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"She was, 'I'm not waiting for that thing,' and she just went," said Christonna Campbell, a family friend."

Talley grabbed a handrail, and ever so slowly, the woman who bowled until she was 104, handed her walker to a friend and began the 10-step climb to the waiting congregation.

That act — the determination to move when it would be easier to be carried — might be the key to longevity, said Peter Lichtenberg, director at Wayne State University's Institute of Gerontology.

Research suggests that the longest-living Americans have a range of backgrounds, lifestyles and health factors. Some drink and even smoke, he said. Some lived through extreme poverty and pain.

But the one commonality?

"One of the areas of research that we're getting really interested in as a field is how much movement people have — really just having your bodies in motion. It's not just 30 minutes of exercise and sit the rest of the day. It's moving around, being active."

That's walking, being out with friends, gardening — refusing to be dictated to by the flipping pages of a calendar, Lichtenberg said.

With morning sun gleaming through the stained glass behind her Sunday, Talley made her way to the front pew reserved for her. The choir sang.
"Down through the years, God's been good to me."

Worshippers clapped, swayed, cheered her on. The piano and organs filled any space that was left. "He's been good. He's really been good to me."

Among those who spoke was Inkster Mayor Hilliard Hampton, who also passed along a suggestion to the congregation from someone that Talley's city taxes be forgiven — an idea that prompted cheers from the congregants.

And he declared an annual day in Inkster to honor Talley "henceforth and forevermore."



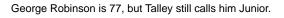
Jeralean Talley accepts flowers from state Rep. David Nathan, D-Detroit, on Sunday, May 25, 2014, at New Jerusalem Missionary Baptist Church. Inkster Mayor Hilliard Hampton declared an annual day to honor Talley, who is believed to be the oldest person in the United States. (Photo: Jarrad Henderson, Detroit Free Press)

As they gathered over potatoes and turkey and birthday cake after service, loved ones compared stories exchanging lessons, they said, that came from "Mother Talley."

Clean living, perhaps? Happiness with what God gives? The unwillingness to let the years wear down the spirit?

She never complains, her daughter said.

She's invigorated by young relatives and morning sunshine, suggested another relative.





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Talley ran a farm with her husband, Alfred, in Inkster when it was a patchwork of fields and neighbors had cows and chickens and ducks, Robinson said, as a piece of birthday cake was slipped in front of him.

She had caught him from a group of boys trying to steal apples from the Talleys' trees.

"She started whooping my butt," Robinson said, laughing. "And then she pulled up my ear and dragged me across the muddy field to my mom, and my mom started whooping my butt, too," he said.

It wasn't an act of anger or selfishness, he said.

It was a life lesson, pure and simple.

In fact, the Talleys hired Robinson a few years later to take care of their cows, Penny and Bossy. They paid him \$3 a week — a whopping sum in those days, Robinson, an artist, recalled.

A few years ago, Robinson realized just how old his family friend was, and he stopped by to visit, to see if she was taking it easy — having come this far. To thank her.

"She was 108 back then. She was outside, she had her dark glasses and she was bent down pulling weeds out of her flower garden. They were beautiful — tulips, I think," he said.

"Maybe that's what kept her going. She loves doing that, and she kept on doing it," he said.

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