

OUR GREATEST GENERATION

Within the battlefields of popular culture, the generation wars continue to rage. Boomers are disparaged. Gen X is ignored. Millennials are maligned. Zoomers jockey for superiority. But above the fray, there's another generation — one whose members saved the world from fascism, challenged segregation, overcame the Great Depression, and survived the Holocaust.

Now in their late 80s, 90s and beyond, these individuals continue to radiate the same strength, resilience, positivity, and adaptability that helped them change the world. Meet a few of these men and women, living here in the Hudson Valley.

BY LISA CESARANO | PHOTOGRAPHY BY MEGHAN SPIRO



William Swetow

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New Paltz

Life Then: WWII and Beyond

Three months after Pearl Harbor, William Swetow, a Brooklyn native and son of Russian immigrants, joined the army. With a CUNY degree and a background in statistics, he spent one year decoding messages as a cryptographer and then became a statistical control officer. "It broadened my horizons," Swetow recalls of the armed forces. "When I entered the army, I'd never been west of New Jersey. I established friendships with unlikely people."

After the war, rather than pursuing an MBA as planned, Swetow returned to his father's automotive supply business, and grew it to employ a staff of 30 over the next 75 years. "I liked what I did — every day was a challenge. To be a little corny about it: I saw myself as an orchestra leader — taking disparate people, ideas, and viewpoints and making them into a symphony of sorts."

On the personal front, "I married two wonderful women," he says. Six years after the death of his first wife, Muriel, he found love again with Vivian, now 90. Though she lived in Boston, "love conquered all, thanks to the American Airlines shuttle."

Together, they raised six children, who are all "decent, honorable, caring people."

Life Today: 'Content'

Beyond good DNA, his wife's attentive care, and the "luck of the draw," Swetow attributes his longevity in part to "the ability to shield myself. I didn't have to internalize every bad thing that ever happened to me...I am content."

Pained by the divisiveness in today's America, Swetow — who lives at Woodland Pond at New Paltz — offers a solution. "My experience in the army broadened my vision. I feel strongly that every boy and girl should spend a year in some sort of volunteer service — army or civilian. I think if we spend a year thrown together with people of other cultures, some of the divisiveness in the country would be bridged."

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"I've been fortunate in life, in that I was born in the United States — that gives you a leg up on everybody else in the world."

Sayoko Tomizawa

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Poughkeepsie

Life Then: A New Life In America

The daughter of a journalist and a nurse, Tokyo-born Sayoko Tomizawa “learned English very well” in high school in Japan. “Then, I went to Catholic College in Tokyo and majored in English,” she says. After earning her degree, she answered an ad in the *Japan Times* and was hired as a secretary at the British Embassy.

At the embassy, she met her husband, then *Stars and Stripes* reporter Thomas Tomizawa. They were married in 1958 and relocated to the United States. “I had a hope to come to America,” she says. “America is very nice.”

Following sojourns in San Francisco and Kentucky, her husband was hired as a producer with NBC in New York. As a documentary producer, he won four Emmys.

During this time, the Tomizawa family — which would grow to include four sons — enjoyed “a very nice, quiet house in Queens off the Grand Central Parkway.”

In the 1970s, when her children were older and in school, Tomizawa decided to return to work. She found a job teaching Japanese at the Berlitz New York City Language Center in New York, where she would also befriend a musical icon.

“John Lennon came to school. He wanted to learned Japanese because he had a Japanese wife, Yoko,” she remembers. “John was a very nice person, and enthusiastic for learning. He was a good student and was very good at drawing pictures. Yoko also came with Sean, who was a baby.”

By the time Thomas died at 59 of a heart attack, Tomizawa had instilled a love of learning in her children — making life as a single mom a bit easier. “All my sons had a scholarship,” she says. “I didn’t have any problem with my children. They worked hard.”

Life Today: ‘I Am Healthy’

Today, Tomizawa spends her days indulging her love of classical music and opera, including her favorites, Mozart, Beethoven, and Tchaikovsky, as well as enjoying her time at the Vassar-Warner Home in Poughkeepsie. Reflecting on her good health, she is hard-pressed to come up with a reason for her longevity. “I am healthy,” she states simply. “I used to swim a lot. I eat anything. I have no advice for anybody. Nothing at all.”



“I had a hope to come to America.”

Elsie Gene Adams

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White Plains

Life Then: Reading Her Way Out of Segregation

A passion for education and for books shaped Elsie Gene Adams' career and personal life. The daughter of a Baptist minister and an elementary school principal, Adams' earliest memories were of Orlando, FL, where her parents, Reverend Benjamin H. Hodge Sr. and Mary Morrison Hodge, had relocated the family from Minnesota. "They were sad, angry memories," she recalls. "They treated us like nobody. All the schools were segregated and we couldn't shop downtown."

Reading became an outlet. "In our house, education was important," says Adams. "I was a great reader and an A student. At the library, I'd take a whole stack of books. I thought I could read my way out of segregation."

Graduating high school in the midst of the Depression, Adams "wanted to go to Rollins College in Winter Park but couldn't because of segregation." Instead, she earned a degree from Florida A&M University and embarked on a career as an elementary school teacher.

Soon thereafter, she moved to Baltimore and married her husband, Benjamin Earl Adams. Together, they had four daughters.

In 1955, Adams returned to Florida. Unable to pursue a master's degree at the University of Florida due to her race, Adams says the state paid for her to attend New York University, where she received her master's degree in education in 1956. In 1958, she became one of the first group of African American teachers hired to work in White Plains. She continued teaching in White Plains until her retirement in 1979. From there, her passion for reading endured as a literacy volunteer, helping adults learn to read.

Life Today: Accentuate the Positive

Today, Adams is active in Grace Episcopal Church in White Plains. But due to the pandemic, she says she misses "community." Beyond good genes and practicing moderation, "my involvement in church played a big part of how I think about life. I have a positive attitude."



“I don't get caught up in the negative side. My sense of humor keeps me sane.”



Julia Migliorato

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Chestnut Ridge

Life Then: Diligence and Domestic Bliss

Born in Yonkers to Italian immigrants, Julia Migliorato describes her parents as hard-working people who “inspired us to be the same.”

She was very musical growing up, singing in the choir and learning to play piano as a teen. At age 14, she got her first job, doing secretarial work for her family’s upstairs neighbor, who was a publisher of ledgers. “If you are the type of who likes to do things, people recognize that, and they make good use of you,” she says. “It made me feel important.”

In 1945, she met her husband, Robert, who was a radio man on the *SS Silver Peak* during World War II, and became engaged two years later. They married, established a household in Yonkers, and moved to Rockland County in 1960. The couple would have three children, four grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren. “I loved cooking, gardening, and being domestic,” she says.

While Robert eventually left a Wall Street job to work in his father’s beauty parlor business, she traces her current quality of life back to his financial acumen. “To this day, the money I have to live here, is the money he left me.”

Life Today: Harmonious

“Here” is Promenade at Chestnut Ridge, where Migliorato has been living since Robert’s death, at age 89. “I am the piano player here. I play every morning and on special occasions.”

She is also active in arts and crafts, and “I became interested in playing bingo for some reason. Today, I won three games.” Her luck, it turns out, is not limited to bingo. “I entered a sweepstakes called WinLoot and won \$10,000. I just deposited the check.”

Her approach to living? “Be like two fried eggs — keep your sunny side up!”

“I like to be with interesting people. I pick people to interact with that are interesting and likeable. I have a very interesting life.”

“The center of my life is being Jewish, having a wonderful family, and living as long as we can.”

Ed Lessing

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Hastings-on-Hudson

Life Then: ‘My mother saved my life three times.’

In May 1942, when the Germans invaded Holland, “my whole family went into hiding,” says Ed Lessing, who was born in The Hague, to Jewish parents. “My mother became the hero of our family — she got hiding places for all of us.”

After finding refuge in several places, including a dairy farm and in the woods, the 17-year-old joined a resistance group.

On December 29, 1943, “the Germans raided us at dawn.” After warning the others, Lessing and a friend fled to a designated safehouse nearby and waited for the others until nightfall. “I thought, *the Germans caught and tortured them and would show up to arrest or kill us.*”

Suddenly a bicycle approached them in the dark. “The boys moved toward the rider, guns drawn. “When we got there, it was not a German or the resistance group. We found my mother.”

She had learned of the raid and warned that they were surrounded by Germans. They gave the friend the bike, while his mother said she had only “one thing to try that was probably not going to work.” Nevertheless, mother and son navigated the dark woods toward an armed German soldier.

They began laughing loudly and greeted the soldier. Assessing that the duo were not dangerous, the guard decided to let them go. Then, Lessing recalls, “slowly, we walked out of the circle of death.”

“My mother never gave up,” says Lessing. “She always had a plan.” After that narrow escape, Lessing went back into hiding until Holland was liberated in May 1945.

Life Today: Sought-After Artist

After the war Lessing emigrated to the U.S. and married Carla, with whom he has a son and daughter. The couple lived in an Israeli Kibbutz for five years, and Lessing later opened a successful graphics studio in New York City. He trained as a painter and has artwork displayed in Washington DC and the Netherlands. Most recently, Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, invited him to send three of his paintings for their collection, including one of his mother called *The Jewish Rescuer*.

