

JENNIFER FUTERNICK

Stella Patri's secret of longevity: 'It's no fun'

STELLA PATRI is 100 years old. She lives next door to a devoted son and daughter-in-law. She is visited by the young and hip. She has just about all her marbles. And yet on most days she says she finds living this long a drag.

When Stella turned 100 on Nov. 1, Mayor Brown declared "Stella Patri Day." More than 200 people came to her birthday gala to tell her how amazing she is.

She looked regal, sitting on an upholstered chair dressed in black palazzo pants and a lavender silk tunic, a yellow rose corsage pinned above the name tag that said, simply, "100."

As she chatted with each guest, her high chirpy voice had none of the gravel of old age.

She loves the attention — who wouldn't? — but she's not sure she deserves it.

"Really, this party wasn't about charm or intelligence," she told me. "It's the years that counted, so I'm not basking in anything. Sometimes I think, 'Let's have

a little beanie made — *Stella the Incredible.*' I am lucky, let's face it. I have good genes. I've had wonderful memories, great times — more than most people. But it's hard being this old. The spirit will, but the body won't.

"The Golden Age — that's a lot

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of baloney. It was so much better when I was young and doing things and not just an old lump. Now I can hardly see. My advice is not to get old. It's no fun and it doesn't pay."

Her truthfulness is disarming, almost funny, but it can be hard to reconcile with a life and old age that is, well, incredible.

She was born in Montreal in 1897, daughter of Eliza and Amadée Laure. The family moved to San Francisco at the turn of the century. And when she was 10, Stella survived the earthquake and fire in 1906.

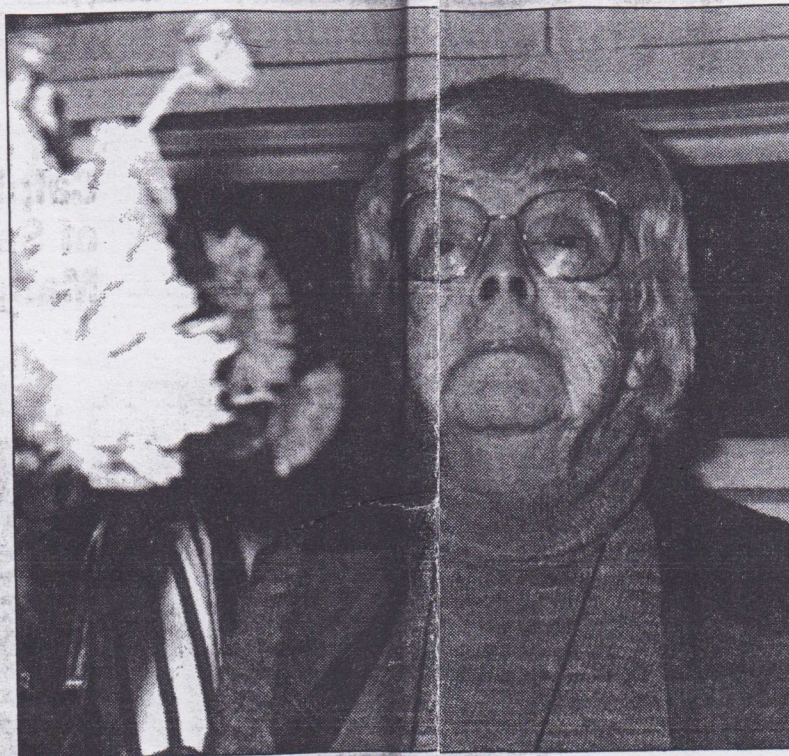
She became an expert milliner at 18. She met Herb Caen when the columnist was 21 (and

she knew him for nearly 60 years).

She antagonized the Corte Madera PTA in the 40s with her radical politics.

She worked as a welder in the shipyards during World War II and was well-known as a union sympathizer.

She was married for 25 years to the legendary art school founder, the late Giacomo Patri. She divorced him in 1951 — an era when divorce was less common. Stella



Stella Patri at her 100th birthday celebration.

raised three well-known sons, all architects of one sort or another.

And at age 64, she began a career as a bookbinder. This, finally, was her passion. At 69, she became a "mud angel" after the 1966 Florence floods, restoring rare books

and vellum manuscripts in the freezing Italian winter.

This is a woman who traveled solo at 90 to see the cherry blossoms in Kyoto.

She made the best polenta imaginable. She still gardens in a

pair of baggy Levis. She frequents Caffè Greco in North Beach. She listens to friends' stories with intentness and equanimity.

I have known Stella for 25 years; she was my husband's bookbinding teacher. Recently, we've spent a lot of time together. Reflecting on her life. Exploring why those who love her wish she could live on, almost forever, as the very cool old lady in their lives.

But she is bone weary of living. I witnessed this one morning when I visited for tea. Stella was vexed by not being able to find sugar because, with dimming eyesight, she can't make out the shape of the box. She says quietly to no one in particular, "I'm not sure how much longer I can go on."

Another morning, I ask her what she loves. She answers immediately, "Reading. Period."

Then she elaborates: "It's so frustrating, this not being able to see. The days are long and dull. I can't stand being so dependent on people. If only I could read, that would solve everything. Having someone else read to me is just not the same."

Though Stella has had remarkably good health for a centenarian, many functions have failed her miserably. Her eyesight is terrible from cataracts, despite two operations;

she no longer can do bookbinding. Her hearing is poor even with a hearing aid, and arthritis makes her exasperatingly stiff and slow.

As I kissed her good-bye at the 100th birthday bash, she said in my ear, "Oh how I wish I could dance."

What about religion? I ask her. As you get older do you feel any need for it?

"None," she answers. "I was raised Catholic and I even taught catechism. But I doubted everything. I was a doubting Thomas then and I never think about religion now. It doesn't help me at all. Doctors rely on religion for older people to help them, the doctors. But I know when I die, that's the end."

I look at Stella and wonder what exactly makes her so different from other old people I know. Why is it that so many, myself included, brag about being the friend of this 100-year-old woman?

And why do so many people want to box her as "Stella the Incredible" rather than a fully complex person who has lived through countless wrenching experiences — a terrible marriage, the death of two grandchildren, two world wars — and is entitled to her own darkness, a woman who is tired of living and ready to die?

There is a Yiddish saying, "You should live to be 120!" Stella once received a birthday card with this exclamation sprawled on it. Until our recent talks, I would think of that saying as sweet and generous. Not now.

Losing someone as wonderful as Stella is unbearable. But wanting our loved ones to live very, very long lives is often our wish, not theirs.