



Dominica, Isle of Longevity. Secrets of the Centenarians. *By Trudy Scott Prevost*

“We are programmed for longevity not death.” says George Roth, Ph.D, the molecular physiology and genetics chief at the National Institute on Aging in Baltimore. “Every species has a maximum life span, for mice it’s about two years, for dogs twenty and for humans about 100.” ~ Quoted from the Vegetarian Times, February 1997

Dominica has a very high ratio of centenarians per capita. These are people who have actually lived on earth over a hundred years! They are a cultural treasure!

What is the secret to their exceptional survival rates?

It was not access to riches, treated water, sterile environments, modern hospitals, work saving equipment, old age pensions or supplements. Our centenarians led humble hard working lives with very little need or access to medical care and no help from social benefits.

Researchers have found that the oldest of the old often enjoy extremely healthy lives with very little contact with modern medicine. Their functional independence often extends beyond the age of 100. Our centenarians often they say they never went to hospital or they are on little or no medication – AFTER 100 YEARS OF LIFE!

We cannot live as our ancestors did, the world has changed but we can incorporate knowledge of their health and longevity lifestyles into our life. The search for this knowledge may result in finding the real fountain of youth!

The 'Living Ancestors' Art Exhibition

“We are very interested in Dominica’s unique place in the world as a leader in longevity,” – American Aging Expert, Janice Jackson.’ ~ The Sun, Wednesday April 11, 2001

When Gabrielle Le Roux - a British born painter and women’s rights promoter - arrived in Dominica in 2001 her goal was to paint strong women. She was commissioned to show her paintings at the upcoming International Women’s Conference in Uganda and was determined to promote Dominica with the art exhibition that evolved from her visit.

On arrival she arranged a meeting with a friend named Natalie Charles (Sister Nats). This gifted woman was renowned for her knowledge in Health and Wellness throughout the Caribbean; she specialized in the study of local centenarian diets and bush tea traditions. Ms. Charles was also committed to recording local working class women’s oral histories and promoting women’s rights in Dominica and throughout the region.

Out of that meeting evolved a locally and internationally acclaimed Art Exhibition called ‘Living Ancestor’s’© – a series of 10 paintings and interviews of local centenarian women – painted by Ms. Le Roux as she traveled the island, taking the time to draw each lady in person and ask what their life was like.

This exhibition was first shown at the Old Mill Cultural Centre; Ms Le Roux often commented on how supportive the people there were; especially Mr. Raymond Lawrence; Chief Cultural Officer with The Cultural Division.

Ms Le Roux arranged to have the caregivers and as many of the ladies as could travel brought to the opening night; then proceeded to dedicate the evening to the caregivers for their hard work and kind and loving dedication to their elders.

‘Living Ancestors’© Art Exhibition has since been shown in Uganda; South Africa; United States of America and most recently in [England](#).

Time has passed and some of these ladies have passed on but their words and portraits continue to inspire people from all over the world to live healthy.

As a health and wellness writer; I realized while reading the Living Ancestors© Interviews; that without access to scientific studies - in some cases without the ability to read or exposure to the outside world - these ladies intuitively knew that it was the healthy lifestyles they led that made them live long.

Diet! Exercise! Environment! Sense of Humor! Attitude! Community! Spirituality! Simple Lifestyle! appear to be strong common denominators in longevity in Dominica and all over the world!

Diet!

‘The oldest woman in the world took hold of the glass of fresh coconut milk and guided it carefully to her lips. She took a delicate sip, made sure not to spill anything and in a voice worn and cracked by age declared: “This helps to keep you young.”’ ~ Elizabeth Israel (Ma Pampo); 128 years of age; recorded by Ross Benson

Most of the 10 women interviewed thought the food they ate was a factor in their longevity.

*‘Elizabeth Israel (Ma Pampo) repeatedly stressed that eating local natural food was the best way to stay strong and healthy. Anastasia Thomas (Aya) always had a good appetite and was fond of the food that she grew in her garden and got from the sea. Nelly (Ma) Cuffy liked good food and this included calaloo, pumpkin, tolima, fig, mangos, homemade butter and mushrooms. Felicity Hogan (Memen, Ma William) loved to eat yam, pigeon peas, calaloo, fish, fig and yampan (breadfruit). Elize Phillip (Ma Bradley) had a good appetite and welcomed all good food, her favourite being meat with yellow yam and vegetables. Evelina Nation (Ama) ate from her garden and feels that the traditional foods that Dominicans ate gave them good and lasting health. Marian Younger Virgile (Ma John) ate mostly from her garden. She liked to boil crab and eat calaloo with coconut milk and palmis or mountain cabbage. She also drank a great deal of bush tea with cane juice. Rose Peters (Aunty Rose) Aunty Rose’s food was always natural and organic, she loved callaloo and crab particularly. Josine Valmond (Ma Morol) remembers eating a lot of tolima, fig, manioc, farine, and avocado. In her childhood bread was unknown and they didn’t eat meat.’ **

These ladies ate local, fresh, unprocessed, organic foods – with fruits and nuts the fast food of choice. These foods were heritage foods adapted to the environment and were not genetically modified. Foods were either: wild foods from the forests, the oceans, the rivers and the areas they lived in or cultivated foods from their farms and gardens. Good nutritious food was a highly valued commodity; often used as gifts to friends and families or as barter for goods and services. Food was a central part of traditional gatherings – to this day families and friends come together at the river to cook a pot over the fire and eat. It took a lot of time and energy but chefs of the day provided a wide array of tasty local dishes using foods around them and in season.

Our centenarians lived in a paradise of foods. A seemingly endless array of fresh fruits, vegetables and greens provided antioxidants, vitamins, minerals and fiber; provisions such as breadfruit, cassava, dasheen, yam and green banana provided complex carbohydrates; while fish, legumes, nuts and occasionally meat provided protein. Spices such as turmeric, ginger, chives, thyme, bay (bwaden), cloves, nutmeg and cinnamon (spice) added flavour. Healthy vegetable fats such as the coconut, butta maca and the local chocolate were consumed regularly. Beverages

included: mineral-rich spring water, rain water, coconut water, cane juice, daily bush teas and fresh juices.

Science has proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that a healthy diet is one of the most powerful; preventative and curative medicines known.

Diet was definitely a strong factor in the longevity of these centenarian women.

Exercise!

‘30-35% of individual differences in longevity can be attributed to genes and the remaining 65-70% to lifestyle factors such as diet and exercise. - American Aging Expert, Janice Jackson.’ ~ The Sun, Wednesday April 11, 2001

Our centenarians did not attend exercise classes but the Living Ancestors interviews show exercise was part of their everyday life.

*‘Elizabeth Israel (Ma Pampo) was always a hard working woman. She continued working until she was 104 years old. Anastasia Thomas (Aya) worked as a farmer and fishmonger. She was known for her outstanding skill as a Bele dancer. Nelly (Ma Cuffy) liked Carnival and, when she was in her late 80’s and too old to really do carnival she would take a set of old tins and tie them behind her and have a little fun in the road. Felicity Hogan (Memen, Ma William) worked as a farmer. Her daughter, Astrid remembers going to meet her when she came from garden every day. Elize Phillip (Leela, Moda, Ma Bradley) also worked in the garden and took great pride in her home and yard. Evelina Nation (Ama) loved to dance Bele and was very good at it. She farmed most of her life. Marian Younger Virgile (Ma John) enjoyed a lot of dancing & parties as well as picnics and excursions. She was the family breadwinner and worked making copra in the Mellville Hall Estate. She was also a farmer. Rose Peters (Aunty Rose) loved to dance. She remembered: “Sometimes the dance was so hot it caught fire. When the dance was so hot like that, the mothers would call the children to come inside.” At 116 years old she still walked to visit Ma Pampo! Josine Valmond (Ma Morol) ‘worked as a farmer and craftswoman.’**

These ladies worked physically all day long; they all had their own gardens and most loved to dance. Daily chores such as food processing, carrying water, hand washing and walking provided many of the benefits of a gym today.

Scientific evidence shows exercise is a natural therapy that can keep us strong and fit as we age, while protecting our heart and bones; improving our mood, sleep and memory; warding off disease and reducing the overall risk of dying prematurely.

The amount of exercise built into daily life has dropped dramatically all over the world over the last 50 years – as exercise burns calories and improves overall body function this drop in physical activity is thought to be one of the most dominate factors in the obesity rates of today.

The physically active lives our centenarians led were definitely a factor in their health and wellness.

Environment!

“Stay away from fertilizers.” ~ Augusta Darroux; a Dominican Centenarian; 101 at the time - when asked “*how others might live as long*”; Times Newspaper; Wednesday, December 13, 2006

We could have the healthiest of lifestyles but if our environment is highly polluted and we do not have access to nature we will not live a long and healthy life.

The concept that we could pollute our environment until it started to pollute us has only recently become mainstream. It was therefore not mentioned much in the interviews but it was definitely a factor.

In an article published in The Environmental Magazine Dr. Grell; former Dean of Ross Medical University; Portsmouth notes that the common denominator of the Centenarian Lifestyles in Dominica is that they ate organic foods and fresh fish, and breathed clean air.

These ladies were not exposed to the 100's of chemicals we are in contact with today - in our food, our water, our air and our home and work environments - studies have shown irrefutably that the chemicals so intricate in the modern day lifestyle are highly detrimental to health and the cause of much disease.

Our centenarians spent most of their day immersed in nature; they went to their farms on foot paths across rivers and up and down mountains; the river was their source of refreshment through bathing and drinking; their natural environment provided food and medicine; the cycles in nature were studied and each source of food that came into season for miles around was visited at just the right time; food was planted by the cycles of nature – these people's lives immersed them in nature for most of their day.

Scientific studies show that immersion in nature has physical and mental benefits and the terminology “nature deficit” has recently evolved for those lacking in contact with nature. A study from Texas A & M University shows that visual exposure to settings with trees produced significant recovery from stress in just 5 minutes.

The unpolluted environments; the healing, balancing effect of nature were definitely a factor in our centenarians long life.

Sense of Humour!

”You grow up the day you have your first real laugh at yourself” Ethyl Barrymore

It’s easy to see from the Living Ancestors© Interviews that these ladies enjoyed a good laugh!

*‘Elizabeth Israel (Ma Pampo) deals with visitors with warmth and humour and jokes freely. Anastasia Thomas (Aya) loved to party and have a good time. Felicite Hogan (Ma William) loves sharing jokes. Elize Phillip (Ma Bradley) is a very humble person with a strong sense of humour. Evelina Nation (Ama) when told she was 103 years old and that the media was making a big fuss over her said “Is that all? With all that fuss I thought I must at least be 300.” Marian Younger Virgile (Ma John) was remembered as a woman who liked parties. Rose Peters (Auntie Rose) had a wonderful sense of humour and when she saw the portrait I had made of her; said she found it looked like her but “a bit old.” Josine Valmond (Ma Morol) has an excellent sense of humour. Virginia Barry (Didi) I sensed a spirit and sense of humour as strong as Ma Pampo her cousin’s.’**

One of the things I noticed on arrival in the Caribbean is that people here are not afraid to laugh out loud. Laughter often rings out on the streets of the towns and villages, in the public transit, and over the crowds of a gathering.

Laughter raises blood pressure just long enough to increase oxygen and blood supply to tissues. It alters the breathing cycle so that more oxygen is inhaled and toxic carbon dioxide exhaled. It lowers levels of the stress hormone called cortisol which has been linked to metabolic syndrome, obesity, Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and autoimmune disorders. It releases chemicals in the brain that make you feel good. Muscles throughout the body tense and relax during laughter in exactly the same way as with stress reduction techniques such as The Progressive Muscle Relaxation of Yoga.

One study measured the effect of watching a funny movie on the ability of heart blood vessels to expand. And they found some surprisingly dramatic results--**laughing increased blood flow as much as a 15- to 30-minute workout.**

According to scientific studies, people who laugh for 15 minutes each day could add an extra eight years to their lives.

Laughter was surely one of the factors in the longevity of our ancestors.

Attitude!

'Tis very certain the desire for life prolongs it." ~ Lord Byron (1788-1824)

Successful aging is a psychological achievement too. Enjoying life; desiring life, interest in life was mentioned in many of the interviews.

*'Elizabeth Israel (Ma Pampo) has an incredibly warm and powerful presence; she is wonderfully lively and serene at the same time. She will live another 15 years as she says she expects to. Anastasia Thomas (Aya) taught her children not to complain and not to cry poverty unless they really fell into it. She told them: "There will always be a good day and a bad day." Aya is alert and interested in what is happening around her. Nelly (Ma) Cuffy said she would like to be remembered as a "beautiful woman, a good woman, a woman with good friends." Felicity Hogan (Memen, Ma William) still loves singing and sang me "Rejoice, Rejoice." Elize Phillip (Leela, Moda, Ma Bradley) was excited to hear that her portrait was going to Africa. Marian Younger Virgile (Ma John) is remembered as an easy going woman. Rose Peters (Aunt Rose) has a deep faith in life unfolding as it should. Virginia Barry (Didi) was known for her generosity and regularly fed the youths in the area for as long as she was in good health. ' **

Neuro-psychologists at the Harvard Medical School, studied longevity and found one clear theme that emerged from comparing the lifestyles of those who live to 100: a good attitude towards life.

Those who live beyond 100 are not quitters - they enjoy meeting and over coming the challenges of life, they accept life as it comes – accepting the losses of life and moving on; they trust all will work out - and manage their stress levels well; they enjoy living – enthusiastically participating in life.

A positive attitude was most likely a strong factor in the long life of our centenarians.

Community!

'The Caribbean nation of Dominica recently learned it is home to 125-year-old Elizabeth Israel, possibly the world's oldest person. Her message: Live simply, stop fighting. By Mark Fineman, LA Times Staff Writer.' ~ Quoted from The Sun, March 22, 2000.

The sense of love, family and community these people felt is truly illuminated in these quotes.

*'Elizabeth Israel (Ma Pampo) has enormous energy and seems to get nourishment from the love of people who visit. Ma Pampo is in the kindly care of Florestine Lewis a neighbour. Anastasia Thomas's (Aya) children were never without care and food. Aya is lovingly cared for by her granddaughter, Dorothy Nesbitt and other family members. Nellie (Ma) Cuffy said she would like to be remembered as a "beautiful woman, a good woman, a woman with good friends. Ma Cuffy is loving attended to by her niece Geraldine, whom she raised as her own daughter. Felicite Hogan's (Memen, Ma William) daughter remembers their childhood as being happy with her father being "a good man who always gave Mama a say." Memen is lovingly cared for by her daughter Astrid Hogan. Elize Phillip (Leela, Moda, Ma Bradley) always helps people as much as she can. Ma Bradley is the only one of the centenarians that I met to be cared for by a man. He is her loving grandson, Douglas Phillip. Evelina Nation (Ama) always making sure to "plant for everyone." Ama is lovingly cared for by her daughter, Mistress Elize Laurent. When Marion Younger Virgile's (Ma John) daughter touches her she smiles and puts her arms around her and kisses her affectionately. Ma John's second child, Ivenia Alexander, looks after her with great affection and humour. Rose Peters (Aunty Rose) is remembered in the neighbourhood as someone very loving and open to helping anyone in need. Aunty Rose is cherished and cared for by her niece Cynthia Charles. Josine Valmond (Ma Morel) was kindly cared for by her niece, Ma Belle. Virginia Barry (Didi) was known for her generosity and regularly fed the youths in the area for as long as she was in good health.'**

In the small villages our centenarians lived in - everyone knew everyone; people helped each other to get through; full moons and special occasions brought people together for fun and food; everyone in the community looked out for the children; the elderly often ensured they had green fig or roasted plantain as the children went home from school; parents brought children up to look for situations where they can help and the elderly and infirm were looked after by neighbors, family and friends.

When we think of factors affecting health and longevity, what often comes to mind are unhealthy practices such as cigarette smoking, lack of exercise, eating the wrong foods and obesity as well

as our biological makeup. Research has now identified the importance of social health factors as well.

A strong sense of community was surely a factor in the health and wellness of our centenarian's.

Spirituality!

“I feel good today because it is God that have me here and I always praise him for my life and all what he is doing for me.” ~ **Ma Pampo**

Ms. Le Roux' conversations with the 10 centenarian ladies in the 'Living Ancestors Art Exhibition' repeatedly mentioned their belief in God.

*'Elizabeth Israel (Ma Pampo) Natural food, simplicity, love and faith seem to sustain her. Anastasia Thomas (Aya) 'has strong faith in God as the One who decides whether she lives or dies and attributes her longevity to this. Felicity Hogan (Memen, Ma William) is a deeply religious woman who likes to pray a lot; she said she taught her children to pray. Elize Phillip (Leela, Moda, Ma Bradley) 'a very humble person with a strong sense of humour, great courage and deep faith; used Bible lessons as the way to instill discipline in her children. She would read to them and explain the Bible. She taught them: "Honesty is the best policy." Evelina Nation (Ama) loved to send her children to school and to church. Marian Younger Virgile (Ma John) said she was a woman of strong faith. Rose Peters (Aunty Rose) had deep faith in life unfolding as it should. Ma John said she was a woman of strong faith. Josine Valmond (Ma Morol) believes God has blessed her with a long life and that it is when God loves you that you live so long. ' **

International studies also show a connection between a healthy, long life and spiritual belief.

Norman B. Anderson, Ph.D., author of the book 'Emotional Longevity: What Really Determines How Long You Live' (Viking Books, 2003), says "Religious participation, which is partly a way many people find meaning, has been associated with decreased mortality in a large number of longitudinal studies."

Herbert Vincent, for 20 years at Harvard, has shown that meditative states, and almost any kind of contemplative state, can be good for the body. When people meditate or pray, the blood pressure comes down, the heart rate falls, immune changes take place in the body, and so on.

Researchers led by psychologist Michael E. McCullough of the National Institute for Healthcare Research analyzed 42 studies to see what effect religion had on health. They report finding 29% higher odds of survival for people who scored higher on measures of public (attendance at a house of worship or participation in activities held by religious organizations) and private (prayer and self-reflection) religious involvement.

Faith and prayer were definitely factors in our centenarian's longer healthier lives.

Simple Life!

'The secret of longevity and fruitfulness isn't just about the food; it's the pristine surroundings, the enduring traditions and the simple way of life' ~ Earl Ettiene; American Eagle Latitudes May/June 2008

The Living Ancestors Interviews illustrate the kind of simple lifestyle the Centenarians of Dominica had.

They did not have a lot of stuff or clutter in their environment; they consumed fewer foods; took a rest on rainy days; they did not have a high debt ratio; slept regularly; they had fewer deadlines to meet and moved at a slower more focused pace.

Today people often rush through tasks; multitasking to finish as much as possible everyday; speeding from one place to another throughout the day; rarely sleeping 8 hours a day.

The manifestations of these levels of chronic stress when not managed properly are evident physically and mentally over time. Study after study is proving that stress can be a factor in many illnesses.

The simple, unrushed, focused lifestyle of our centenarians was quite likely a facet of their long healthy lives.

Trudy Scott Prevost is a Writer, Yoga Teacher, Eco Retreat Planner; Early Education Teacher and Consultant living her dream in Dominica. Researching and promoting healthy living has been a lifetime passion. For more information contact Trudy at rainbowyoga@yahoo.com or check her blog www.naturallivingindominica.wordpress.com

For more information about the Living Ancestors© art exhibition, paintings or interviews; contact Gabriel Le Roux at livingancestors@yahoo.com

© Gabrielle Le Roux

All photos © Gabrielle Le Roux; used with permission

* Quotes from Living Ancestors Interviews; 2001; by Gabrielle Le Roux; used with permission