



In photo on left, Viola Hostettler, president of Farm Women Society 14, pins Irma Brubaker for being an 80-year-old member of the Pennsylvania Society of Farm Women. Despite facing numerous disappointments in life, Irma believes she has much to be thankful about.

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Lancaster Farming Staff
LITITZ (Lancaster Co.) — Irma Brubaker has buried two babies and three husbands. But on Thanksgiving Day, the feisty, cheerful 80-year-old will find plenty of things for which to thank God.

"It's not in my genes to be happy. Suicide and depression is what runs in my family," she said.

"But I have a choice. I can choose to have a pity party or I can, with God's help be happy. Without God's help I would never make it," Irma repeatedly insists.

Born in 1914 in Philadelphia, Irma was exposed to the harshness of life almost from the beginning.

At the time I didn't think that I was having a terrible childhood, but later, I realized that I had a much different childhood than most.

Her father struggled with severe emotional problems triggered by the death of one of Irma's brothers. After that her father heard voices, rambled, and was not able to hold a job, although he previously was an expert lithographer and artist.

When Irma was five, her father, who had attempted suicide several times, abandoned the family. Irma and another brother were raised in a single-parent household — uncommon in those years.

To support her children, Irma's mother took in boarders, did ironing, made fish cakes, doughnuts, and numerous other ventures to keep food on the table. Always in search of a bigger house with more bedrooms for boarders, the family moved 13 times.

Despite her father's idiosyncrasies, Irma loved her father and visited him. He sometimes was well enough to paint fabulous detailed pictures. He read voraciously.

"He was a very smart man," Irma said.

But the father and daughter relationship was not without embarrassment. Irma remembers everyone staring at them as they walked down the street because her father was partially deaf and talked in a loud voice. Also, he answered voices that only he heard.

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most," Irma said.

Irma finished the tenth grade then went to a business college for eight months.

Her first job was with Prudential Life Insurance. "After that I never had a problem getting hired for any job I wanted," she said.

She worked for an insurance company for eight years until she married a chicken farmer who farmed near Vineland, N.J.

"After living in a row house all my life, I thought I died and went to heaven when I moved to my husband's farm," Irma said.

The happily married couple were ecstatic when a son was born about two years later.

During the first two years of life,

the baby developed normally. Then illness, initially diagnosed as celiac disease but after his death as cystic fibrosis, destroyed the little one. When he died at four years of age, Irma was distraught.

When she gave birth to a baby daughter a few months later, Irma knew something was wrong.

"I'm going to lose this one too," Irma told her mother. Tests showed that the baby's lungs were perforated with holes. She died at four months, which was 14 months after the death of the couple's first child.

The doctor warned her not to have more children. He said, "The next time it (the disease) might attack the brain."

"I wanted to commit suicide," Irma said.

Instead, she returned to work as a bookkeeper.

For a while Irma struggled with a sense of uselessness. "To work just to feed one's self seemed so empty," she said.

"Those first years after the death of her little ones were the most difficult. Whenever she heard a baby cry, Irma cried too."

Nevertheless, she found work the best antidote for her grief.

A resourceful person, Irma's spirits rallied. She and her husband became active in church work and spent time traveling together.

The poultry industry in New Jersey soon dwindled to nothing,

and her husband was forced to find work elsewhere. He threw himself into construction work.

But the hard physical labor brought on a heart attack. When the doctor told her that her husband had died, Irma said, "I guess it's God's will, but it certainly isn't easy."

The doctor said, "You know it wasn't easy for Christ either."

"That made me look at things in a new way," said Irma, who is now a staunch believer in "let God be God — not Santa Claus."

"He's sovereign. He will do what He wants to do when He wants to it," she said. "We don't like people like that on earth but He is not an earthling — He's God."

"If you are true to God, He is true to you," she said of her ability to accept her fate. "I've experienced God being a husband to me just like He says He will be to the widow."

Irma was 50 years old when she buried her first husband.

While working as a bookkeeper and a piano player for a Christian camp, Irma met her second husband-to-be. He was a retired banker who was 13 years older than she. She spent five happy years with him in New York until a cerebral hemorrhage claimed his life.

The death again was a difficult separation. But by this time, Irma had learned that "God would take me through the valley of the shadow of death — not keep me in it."

A friend from Strasburg suggested that Irma move to the Lancaster area during the winter months.

She did and promptly got a job

as a secretary. In a few months, a co-worker asked Irma if she would be open to meeting his widowed father.

"When you're my age, you don't fall in love like you do in your 20s, but you can tell almost right away if it's a good match," Irma said.

Irma said that she limits her tears to under five minutes.

"I hold out my hand to God with the faith of a mustard seed and He honors that. He's given me the faith to walk through the shadow of death — not stay there," she said.

Irma lives in an apartment at Landis Homes, a retirement com-

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Indeed, the third union was a good match. The third husband brought with it children and grandchildren who have accepted Irma wholeheartedly into the family. It's filled that void Irma had after losing her own children.

Irma became a vital part of the Strasburg community. She joined Society 14 of Farm Women.

The marriage lasted 21 years until last year when death again parted Irma from her husband.

"Grief comes over me like a wave sometimes and I could cry for hours," Irma said. "But crying is a waste of time. I tell myself, 'cut it out, accept what you cannot change.' I can choose to pity myself or to be happy."

community. "There are worse things than death," she said. I look around at many of the people in this place — and I realize how much I have to be thankful for. I've always had happy marriages — I never got a lemon. And, I have my health."

At Irma's age, she said that work is no longer an option for an antidote for grief. Instead she keeps busy by visiting the ill at the retirement home. She reads to those who cannot read and plays the piano at gatherings and at her church.

"Music really uplifts me," she said. "It has been a vital part of my life."

She had taken piano and mandolin lessons in her preteen years and continued studies on her own to become proficient in both piano and organ.

Irma will spend Thanksgiving Day with some of her third husband's children. While she is recounting her blessings, she wants to remind others, "Tell your family you love them — don't just say it, show it. Live today so if you are separated tomorrow you will have no regrets."

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Homestead Notes