EXTRAORDINARY CENTENARIANS IN AMERICA

Their secrets to living a long vibrant life

GWEN WEISS-NUMEROFF
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Extraordinary Centenarians in America is based on the recollections of the people commemorated in this book as well as their closest family members. Due to the possibility of human error, the author cannot guarantee the complete accuracy of the information. It should also be noted that since the time the interviews were conducted, some of these individuals have passed away. The author expresses her condolences to their loved ones and hopes this book will serve as a reminder of their incredible legacy.

Although nutrition and lifestyle data has been collected and reported, the author is not dispensing medical advice or calling this a scientific study. The intent of the author is to provide information for readers to consider in consultation with their health practitioners.

Visit Gwen Weiss-Numeroff’s website at www.livingvibrantlyto100.com

A portion of the author’s royalties will be donated to the Ovarian Cancer Research Fund.
DEDICATION

In memory of my beloved mother and brother. Your spirits guided me throughout.
THE CENTENARIAN PHENOMENON

According to the most recent Census data, there are currently almost 62,000 people who have reached the age of 100 living in the United States. There are five times as many centenarian women than there are men. In fact, centenarians are now the second fastest growing demographic segment in the country, second only to the super-centenarians (those at least 110 years of age).

While much attention has been given to the number of centenarians living in Japan, the United States has more centenarians than any other country in the world. Upper-nonagenarians, or those living between 95 and 99, are increasing rapidly as well, up over 30% versus a decade ago. There are over 398,000 American upper-nonagenarians.

Longevity itself is one of the greatest advances of the 20th century, with the average life span nearly 30 years longer compared to the century prior. Now, with even greater medical advances, the promise shown by new stem cell research, recent genetic breakthroughs and many new initiatives solely focused on centenarians, an even greater increase in longevity is certainly possible.

According to the Gerontology Research Group and Guinness Book of World Records, the oldest verified person that ever lived was Jeanne Calment from France, who died at 122 years and 164 days old. At the time this book was written, there were only four Americans among the top 100 oldest people that ever lived. You will
get to know two of these Americans in the following pages: Besse Cooper, 116, the world’s oldest living person and Dr. Leila Denmark, 114, the world’s fourth oldest.

Let’s look through a small window at what life was like in the United States of America when our centenarians were born versus today:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>1912</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>US Population</td>
<td>92 million</td>
<td>312 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Expectancy</td>
<td>Male 48.4 years, Female 51.8</td>
<td>Male 75.7, Female 80.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Salary</td>
<td>$750/year</td>
<td>exact number unknown but significantly higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Debt</td>
<td>$1.15 billion</td>
<td>$16+ trillion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorce</td>
<td>1 out of 1000</td>
<td>1 out of 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacation</td>
<td>12-day cruise $60</td>
<td>$600+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk</td>
<td>$.32/gallon</td>
<td>$3.20+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Lone Star College-Kingwood Library – kclibrary.lonestar.edu; 2011 Census Bureau; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Guinness Book of World Records; divorce statistics from Jennifer Baker; Forest Institute of Professional Psychology, Springfield; Bureau of Labor Statistics; usgovernmentdebt.us
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It took 2 years of searching to find this extraordinary group of individuals from all walks of life who fit a certain criteria—lived in America for at least 75 years, 100 years old (give or take a few years), lived healthily most of their lives and vibrantly into their 90s, 100 and beyond.

Thank you to all of those remarkable individuals for generously sharing your lives with me, from your childhood memories to your nutritional habits. You were all such honest, accessible and truly lovely people. Thank you for your captivating stories and words of wisdom. They will remain in my mind and in my heart always and will certainly inspire countless others.

I would also like to thank those who led me to some of these incredible people, whether it was by sending me media clippings, personal referrals or actual introductions—you all are greatly appreciated: Irving Ladimer and Bel Kaufman (both profiled in this book), Stacey Cusick, Dr. Moises Fraifeld, Diane Greenspan, Ro Miller, Nicole Futterman, David Weiss, Betty Turner, Debra Harten and Alisa Destefano.

Special thanks to my wonderful husband, Bruce, who was always on the lookout for extraordinary centenarians, willingly accompanied me on some of my longer trips and supported me throughout the entire process. My partner and best friend for life, may we be together as long and as strong as the inspiring people in this book.

— Gwen Weiss-Numeroff
I would like to introduce you to an extraordinary group of Americans. Their ages range from 96 to 116. Each is exceptional in unique ways and they all share one thing in common – an infectious spirit and the ability to inspire. These individuals will truly help diminish your fear of aging, as they not only have lived long, they have lived vibrantly.

Please refer to the *Reaching 100 and Beyond!* tables at the end of each chapter for information on each subject’s family history and lifestyle factors. This information was provided by the subjects themselves and some of their family members.
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INTRODUCTION

My intense fear of illness and loss started when I was 8, when the closest person in the world to me, my big brother Steven, died of leukemia. He was 9. During the four years of his illness, everyone in our family knew that he was dying except for me, and Steven. The family did not have the emotional strength to tell us. I was completely devastated and it changed my life’s path forever.

While I was in my 20s, my dear Uncle Jerry died at 48 of a heart attack; he also had multiple sclerosis. His daughter, my cousin Janice, died a few years later of a bad case of asthma; she was 28. Then the grandparents died, three of them were in their 60s and early 70s, although one managed to live to 79 years old, and she was the sickest of them all.

Moving into my 30s and early 40s, my best friend and maid of honor, Tammy, died of breast cancer at 33. My friend and devoted secretary for 6 years, Jean, died of a blood disease in her early 50s. Then Uncle Herbie died in his 60s, and Aunt Irma in her early 70s, both from disease.

The final straw was when I was 45, three years ago. My mother fell ill from ovarian cancer at 70. Doctors diagnosed it just 3 weeks before she died. The sudden loss left me devastated once again.

I needed some answers and, more importantly, some hope!

The fear of illness and losing loved ones had been looming over my head since that fateful day at 8 years old. I had been studying nutrition since my teens trying to find ways to prevent such a devastating loss from happening again. I also studied psychology to see if there were emotional factors that contributed to disease and decreased longevity. Most studies indicated that there was indeed
a significant correlation between diet, stress, mental attitude and disease.

Over the next decades I began to walk the talk. I ate a healthy, balanced diet and became very active in tennis and yoga, significantly decreasing my stress level. I began taking life more in stride, truly appreciating my blessings, and in the midst of all this, the looming fear began to diminish and I started to feel a sense of control over my health and joy in my life.

I began my career in advertising due to my interest in consumer behavior, but not surprisingly ended up in the health and wellness field. I founded a corporate wellness company to teach large groups of working individuals how to reach their optimal health and balance. I started working with schools, lecturing to children about increasing their energy through quality food, and advised administrations about improving the school food. Eventually, I started my own private practice, coaching individuals to live a healthy, vibrant life.

This path was working. I was helping people improve their health, productivity and well-being and my own physical and emotional health was better than I could ever have imagined, particularly given my family history.

However, questions about longevity still lingered in my mind. It was my mother’s abrupt death that incited me to actively search out people who were living examples of my ultimate dream for my family, my clients and for myself. I needed to meet those who have lived a long, healthy and vital life. I wanted to meet people in my own country, not in Okinawa, Japan, or some other remote region where the culture, water or diet were so different from my own. I wanted to hear their incredible stories of what they had witnessed in their lives, how they dealt with so much loss witnessed simply because of their longevity. I wanted to hear their words of wisdom given their vast life experience and, most importantly, learn “How they got to be so old?”

Unlike today, people in their generation regularly died from polio,
influenza, diabetes, asthma, high blood pressure—if they survived childbirth! The average life expectancy of those born before the first world war was only 50. These individuals have exceeded all expectations, doubling the norm—how did they do it?

Was it just genetic, did their lifestyle have anything to do with it, or their personalities? What were the commonalities, if any, amongst them? And what on Earth could they possibly be doing to pass their time at such an old age?

I poured through various news and social media, and asked hundreds of people for anyone they knew who fit my criteria: 100 years old, give or take a few years, still generally healthy and mentally engaged.

As I started locating these extreme elders, what I found was truly amazing! I found centenarians, upper-nonagenarians (96-99) and even some super-centenarians (110+) in this country who were not only still healthy and alert, they had been living strong, vibrant lives in their 80s, their 90s and even into their 100s! Still working, driving, volunteering, traveling, writing, doing things they had never done before in their lives, in their “platinum”* years! After hearing about some of these folks, my criteria shifted. I was no longer just looking for healthy and mentally engaged centenarians, I was now searching for vibrant, extraordinary centenarians.

As I grew to know this amazing group of people and many of their family members, who generously welcomed me into their lives, I was beyond inspired. Each one of these people was outstanding in a unique way.

In their presence, I felt my old fear of illness and aging quickly melting down, and I felt hopeful! I learned that I just might not be doomed by my genetics after all, and that there is so much more to do and accomplish in the coming decades of my life. I will cherish their incredible stories, wonderful personalities, and words of wisdom, even the quirky ones, for the rest of my life.

*‘Platinum’ is defined in this book as those years 80 and beyond.
My first interviewee was Mr. Gardner Watts. I discovered him in our local (Rockland County, New York) newspaper as he had recently climbed the Statue of Liberty, by stairs—from the base to her crown. He was 96 years old at the time.

My hope is that these extraordinary Americans will not only fascinate you, but help diminish your fear of aging, inspire you to think more positively about your future, furnish you with ideas of what you can do in the latter chapters of your life, and motivate you to take better care of your mind, body and spirit.

Reaching 100 doesn’t necessarily mean physical or mental disability, nor does it mean, in some cases, retirement. These people are helping to redefine aging in new and inspirational ways.
EXTRAORDINARY CENTENARIANS IN AMERICA
Novelist, Teacher, Granddaughter Of Sholem Aleichem
Born: May 10, 1911, in Berlin, Germany
Current residence: Manhattan, New York
Words of Wisdom

“Laughter keeps you healthy. You can survive by seeing the humor in everything. Thumb your nose at sadness; turn the tables on tragedy. You can’t laugh and be angry, you can’t laugh and feel sad, you can’t laugh and feel envious. And there is always something funny, if you have the eyes to see it.”

Bel Kaufman was gifted. Her grandfather, Solomon Naumovich Rabinovich, was a famous author and playwright, known by his pen name Sholem Aleichem (it means “peace be with you”). Sholem Aleichem’s stories inspired the marvelous musical Fiddler on the Roof. It was apparent after meeting with Bel that she indeed inherited her grandfather’s genes of humor and creativity, traits which came in handy throughout her life.

Whether it was growing up during the Russian Revolution or struggling as a teacher in the inner city schools, Bel always found a way to look past the difficulties and see the humor in it all. This talent was central to her tremendous success as the author of the novel Up the Down Staircase, based loosely on her life as a teacher in New York City. Her novel sat on the New York Times Best Seller
list for well over a year and was adapted to both film and stage. The book was set during early racial integration and busing, and dealt with the difficulties of bureaucracy, student indifference and teacher incompetence, yet was told in a humorous way that resonated with readers all over the country.

The success of this book led to her second career as a lecturer, just like her grandfather, in venues filled with people who wish to hear her words of wisdom about surviving darkness with laughter.

Here is how her story unfolds...

**The Russian Revolution though the eyes of a child**

Bel was born in Germany where her father was studying medicine. When she was just a young girl, the family moved to Odessa in Russia during the heat of the Russian Revolution. There, she said, she would “frequently come upon dead bodies in the street, frozen in grotesque postures.” She explained, “A child has no basis for comparison: Didn’t every child do that? I took it for granted that that’s how children lived.” Young Bel also saw nothing unusual about standing in line for a ration of green bread. “There was no flour, so the bread was made from the shells of peas.”

“In Odessa,” she recalls, “every other week there was a new government—Bolshevik, Stalinist, Leninist. During the communist Bolshevik regime, I was wheeling my little brother in his carriage in front of my house and two young communist women in leather jackets approached me. They proceeded to take my brother out of the carriage, plopped him into my 9-year-old skinny arms, took the carriage, and said to me (in Russian), ‘We also have babies!’ I went crying to my mother with my brother in my arms. She asked me what happened, and I replied, ‘They have babies, too!’

“Militia would enter homes, break things, take things. We decided
to leave Russia, not because we were Jews, but because we were something worse to them—bourgeois. My father was a doctor; we had a house, a cook. Many of my father’s colleagues were jailed, even killed.”

In 1923, at age 12, Bel and her family managed to flee Russia, thanks partly to the enduring prestige of her grandfather, Sholem Aleichem, who had died 7 years earlier. Even through wars and revolutions, Sholem Aleichem had been incredibly famous. He was a renowned Yiddish writer who spun the bittersweet Tevye stories that later became the source for *Fiddler on the Roof*. He was so beloved in Russia, the US and Israel that his face appeared on postage stamps and coins, streets in Russia and Israel were named after him, many monuments of him were erected, and more than 100,000 people attended his funeral, more than any other in New York City history, where he died. When Bel’s mother pleaded with the authorities to allow her to visit her mother, Aleichem’s widow, who was living in the US, not surprisingly, they obliged.

**Moving to the USA**

When Bel and her parents moved to the United States, they dealt with the challenges of learning a foreign language and boarding with unfamiliar relatives in a strange new place. As soon as
she graduated high school, amidst the Great Depression, she fled straight to Manhattan on her own. “When I first moved here,” she recalled, “I paid only $4.50 a week for rent and ate at Automats. I watched unemployed men selling pencils and apples on the street.” She has lived in New York City ever since.

A relentless woman
Bel learned enough English to graduate from Hunter College, magna cum laude, and received her master’s degree from Columbia University with high honors. She was offered various PhD programs, but had fallen in love with a medical student (who eventually became her first husband), and turned her back on academia to work and support him through school. The work she had chosen was teaching.

You need a license to teach in New York City public schools. Despite the degrees and honors Bel had achieved, the Board of Education kept failing her on the oral examination because of her strong Russian accent. She attended a year of speech classes and, finally rid her accent, passed the oral.

Despite this achievement, the Board of Ed rejected her again because they didn’t like her interpretation of the assigned test poem. Not one to back down, she mustered her chutzpah and contacted the poet herself. The long letter she got back included the poet’s warm praise of her interpretation, which she sent along to the Board of Ed. Thoroughly chastened, the Board finally gave Bel her license to teach. Bel notes, “From then on, they only assigned poems from dead poets.”

An accidental best seller
While she was struggling to get her teaching license, Bel wasn’t idle. She spent years as a “permanent sub” (substitute) working in
some of the city’s worst schools. The experience provided the material—literally—for her future best-selling novel *Up the Down Staircase*. She found her best ideas going through classroom wastebaskets gathering notes the students had written on scraps of paper. Although the subject of her book was serious, she wrote it with humor and affection, a gift inherited from her famous grandfather. Her novel later became a play and a movie, and was translated into 16 languages.

**A woman by any other name...**

Bel was the first female writer whose work was published in *Esquire* magazine. She employed a bit of subterfuge to achieve that honor: she chopped off the last two letters of her name, Belle, hoping that the publishers would assume “Bel” was a man’s name. It turned out to be unnecessary; even when they found out, they liked her short stories so much they published them anyway. The new version of her name became her byline for the rest of her life.

**Still so much to do**

At 101, Bel is still writing short stories, some about her grandfather, and lectures widely, passing along what she has learned about surviving through humor. She’s been interviewed on the *Today* show, featured in a documentary, *Laughter in the Darkness*, about her grandfather’s life, and a documentary is currently in the works about her own life.

“I’ll never retire [from working] as long as I live—that’s like retiring from life!”
She is adamant on the subject of retirement: “I’ll never retire as long as I live—that’s like retiring from life! I’ll never stop writing, teaching, lecturing. If you’re in good health, living is exciting on its own.”

Bel shares a Manhattan apartment with her second “husband,” Sidney Gluck, 95, whom she never technically married. Bel and Sidney have been together for 40 years since her divorce. What is the secret to their long, loving relationship? “We don’t do anything together. His interests are so different from mine. He is an authority on China, lectures about the country, and has a TV program about it. He also runs the Sholem Aleichem foundation.” She adds playfully, “He also likes older women.”

A year before he died in 1916, Sholem Aleichem wrote to Bel: “Dear Babushka, I’m writing you this letter to ask you to hurry up and grow so that you can write me a letter. In order to do this, you must drink milk, eat vegetables and soup, and fewer candies.” At 101, she still intends to answer his letter.

Bel loves reaching 100. “For the first time in my life, I don’t have to do what someone else says I have to do. If I don’t recognize people, I have an excuse—I just say I’m 100 years old!”

Bel and her “husband,” Sidney Gluck. Photo courtesy of Ms. Kaufman
Lifestyle

| General health | Bel has never had a serious illness in her life. Even when her appendix was taken out, it was found to be healthy. (Her father, a doctor, kept it in a jar.) |
| Smoking        | Smoked three packs a day for 40 years, finally quitting at age 60. |
| Alcohol        | An occasional social drink. |
| Nutrition      | Bel’s diet is better now, but “I was brought up during famine, so I have enormous respect and love for food. I ate everything, including junk food. But I didn’t overeat, and I weigh today the same as when I was 20.” She takes 2,000 mg of vitamin C on a regular basis. |
| Physical activity | Bel has always loved dancing, and still does ballroom dancing for 90 minutes every week. When she was young she stayed fit by climbing poles. |
| Current interests | Bel writes funny poems and short stories; “doodles”; reads avidly; lectures to teachers, Jewish groups and writers; and, until recently, traveled all over the world. |
| Family         | Bel has one daughter and one son. They don’t live nearby but she speaks with them on a regular basis. She has one granddaughter and sees her brother regularly, who lives a few blocks away. He calls her every morning to start her day off with a funny joke. |

Family history

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGE OF DEATH</th>
<th>CAUSE OF DEATH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pediatrician, Co-Developer Of The Whooping Cough Vaccine
Born: February 1, 1898, in Portal, Georgia
Current residence: Athens, Georgia

DR. LEILA DENMARK
Dr. Leila Denmark is a world record holder in more ways than one. Before she retired at the age of 103, she was the oldest practicing pediatrician in the world. At age 114, she is the 4th oldest verified living person in the world. She also recently became one of the top 100 oldest people who ever lived.

Besides her extreme longevity, Leila lived an extraordinary existence saving countless lives.

In 1928, she graduated from the Medical College of Georgia. Remarkably, she was the only woman in her graduating class. Following her residency, Leila became the first physician at Henrietta Eggleston Hospital, a pediatric hospital that had just opened on the campus of Emory University. Following her work there, for the next 70+ years she practiced privately out of her home where she never
refused a patient, even those who could not pay.

“A life devoted to saving children

Leila devoted much of her life to serving children and expressed her passionate views on child-rearing in her best-selling book, *Every Child Should Have a Chance*, published 40 years ago. She also wrote a book 30 years later, at age 104, titled *Dr. Leila Denmark Said It! Advice for Mothers from America’s Most Experienced Pediatrician*. A woman way ahead of her time, Leila was one of the first doctors to object to cigarette smoking around children and drug use in pregnant women. She said, “The greatest change I have seen in my life is the neglect of children.”

Leila also had strong concerns about the nutrition of children. She believed that cow’s milk was unhealthy [which is supported by current research as well—read the “China Study” by T. Colin Campbell]. She also repeatedly told children and their parents to eat whole fruits rather than fruit juices and to drink primarily water. Leila believed, “Pizza is going to

*Leila with her daughter Mary. Courtesy of Mary Denmark Hutcherson.*
support a whole generation of cardiologists!”

**Sugar is the Devil**
Leila certainly practiced what she preached. She drank only hot water every day—no coffee, tea, fruit juice, soft drinks, and absolutely no alcohol. She also avoided sugar like the plague. When she was a young adult, she developed arthritis. Until this day, Leila swears that cutting out sugar completely cured her arthritis. Even in her centenarian years, she refused cake on her birthday, as there was too much sugar in it.

*“From can until can’t”*
According to Leila, “I would work from can until can’t, beginning my office hours at 8 a.m., I would stay until the last patient left and I was available on any day at any hour.” According to her daughter Mary, “Mother took as long as she needed to see each patient with no appointments needed and was exceedingly busy during WWII as many doctors were in the military. Additionally,” she says, “during the Great Depression, she treated most patients without pay; she just loved what she did, she wasn’t in it for the money.”

*Courtesy of Mary Denmark Hutcherson*
A miraculous development
Mary said that her mother’s greatest success was her work in developing the Pertussis (or Whooping Cough) vaccine that saved an untold number of lives over the past 75 years. However, according to Leila, her greatest success was each time she helped a child who came to her looking like “the wrath of God, and after a few months of good nutrition and medical treatment, if necessary, would blossom and bloom as a fine healthy child.”

An anomaly in her great family
Born in Georgia, Leila was the third oldest of 12 siblings and the only one still living. Most of her siblings succumbed to heart disease and some to cancer. The youngest sibling to die was 25 years old and the oldest was 88.

According to Mary, there were a few significant differences between the lifestyle habits of her mother’s siblings and Leila herself. Her siblings all smoked and drank regularly while Leila abhorred both. While they regularly ate pork fat from their family farm, Leila wouldn’t dare touch it. And, while they all had their fair share of syrup and other sugar-laden substances, Leila essentially boycotted refined sugar for the majority of her life.

Valuable advice
Even after retiring at 103, Leila’s phone was still constantly ringing as parents from all over Georgia sought out her unique and valuable advice on living a healthy and happy life. Here are some of her words of wisdom that Leila generously shared with her patients, their families and thousands of readers in her books:

- Avoid junk food
- Love what you do
- Drinking cow’s milk is dangerous
- Treat others as you would like to be treated
- Avoid sugar
• A sense of humor is very important for longevity
• Children are not getting parental guidance and it’s wrecking this nation
• We need to think about everything we eat and drink
• During the Great Depression, 11,000 of America’s 25,000 banks closed, so save what you can, appreciate what you have
• As a doctor, it is important to find the root cause of a problem
• Never raise your hand or your voice to a child
• Parenting has gone out of style
• Children and adults should eat fruit instead of drinking fruit juices
• Drink only water.

Longevity is a pattern in all that she does. Leila married John Eustice Denmark and they were together for 62 years until his death at 91, just eleven years ago.

A national treasure, if you mention Dr. Leila Denmark’s name anywhere in Georgia or to most anyone in the field of medicine, they will certainly be familiar with her incredible life and humanitarianism, and many were indeed one of her patients. There is even an exit named after her on a Georgia highway!

NOTE: As this super-centenarian has lost some of her memory, much of the information has been provided by her daughter Mary, who has lived with her for the past 7 years and has been close to her for her entire life.
### REACHING 100 & BEYOND!

#### Lifestyle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Smoking</th>
<th>Never, “hated it with a passion.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol</td>
<td>Never, “hated it even worse.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Nutrition

Never had a weight problem. Enjoyed meat, green vegetables, and a starch for supper and an egg, toast and hot water for breakfast. She only drank hot water; no coffee, tea or soft drinks and often did not eat lunch, as she was busy working. She never ate sugar or dessert, except on occasion some honey on toast. On occasion when she ate out, she enjoyed shrimp and lobster.

#### Physical activity

No formal exercise but was on her feet most of the time, moving constantly. Even in her 90s, she walked to her fish pond each afternoon, which was a round trip of a half-mile. She seldom sat still and was always busy with something.

#### Current interests

After retiring, at 103, Leila Denmark still consulted with patients until 3 years ago. She enjoyed gardening, making her own clothes and reading until her vision slowly deteriorated. She traveled in her later years but always wanted to get back home. She also enjoys eating out and going back and forth to her house in Forsyth County for short visits.

#### Family

One daughter, with whom she lives, two grandsons, two great-grandchildren and several nieces and nephews who visit her regularly.
Family history

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Member</th>
<th>Age of Death</th>
<th>Cause of Death</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>cancer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>heart disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sister</td>
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Note: Six of Leila Denmark’s nieces and nephews also died of heart disease, all under the age of 60.

After retiring at 103, Leila’s phone was still constantly ringing as parents sought out her unique and valuable advice.
The World’s Oldest Active Investment Professional
Born: December 19, 1905, in Manhattan, New York
Current residence: Manhattan, New York

IRVING KAHN
discovered this remarkable man and his family of centenarians while perusing the cover of *New York Magazine*. The cover story was about a comprehensive study called the Longevity Genes Project, which took place at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. Dr. Nir Barzilai, the Director for the Institute of Aging, initiated this study in 1998 to determine whether centenarians had a common type of “longevity gene.” His hope was to identify a gene or multiple genes that could lead to new drug therapies to help people live longer, and avoid or delay diseases such as cardiovascular, cancer, type 2 diabetes and Alzheimer’s.

Irving and his three siblings all participated in this project along with over 500 subjects, aged 95 to 122 and their children. All of the older subjects, including the Kahn family, were deemed...
“Super Agers” as they reached their extreme longevity never having experienced any of the above major diseases. Interestingly, Barzilai searched for genes that helped prevent disease in contrast to previous research focused on genes more likely to cause disease. Thus far, the results have been promising. Barzilai has indeed found common genes amongst some of the “Super Agers”, including the Kahns, that may have contributed to their longevity and is already working on the development of new drug therapies.

Irving’s siblings included Helen, a former talk-show host nicknamed “Happy” who died recently at 109; Leonore or “Lee,” a noted humanitarian who died at 102 in 2005; and younger sibling, Peter, a former Hollywood photographer and cinematographer who is currently 102 and living in Connecticut with his wife. Unfortunately, Peter became blind about 5 years ago. The Kahns were at one time considered the world’s oldest siblings.

Dr. Barzilai had indeed found common genes amongst some of the “Super Agers.”
Still working at 106, Irving Kahn was an ideal candidate for *Extraordinary Centenarians in America*. He agreed to meet with me in his office on the 22nd floor overlooking Madison Avenue where he still works 5 days a week.

**A start in finance during the Great Depression**

A soft-spoken, remarkably alert man with large reading glasses and new hearing aids, Irving vividly recalled his early childhood over 100 years ago. He recalled that his family of Eastern European Jews lived in Harlem, a neighborhood filled with immigrants from all over Europe. “Hungarians, Russians, Polish, I was exposed to many different people and languages early on.” Perhaps this exposure incited his widespread curiosity about life and his thirst for learning. However, out of all his interests, from solar technology to aerospace, Irving’s passion was always finance.

Irving decided not to finish his courses at City College. Why? He was presented with a coveted opportunity to work as a teaching assistant at Columbia Business School alongside perhaps the greatest investor of all time, Benjamin Graham. Benjamin Graham was considered to be the “father of security analysis and value investing.” His textbooks are still considered to be required reading for most investors. One of Graham’s most famous students... Mr. Warren Buffett.

Benjamin Graham became Irving’s mentor and had such a profound influence on his life that Irving named one of his three

“It was a rich man’s business in those days and it was certainly anti-Jewish. Benjamin Graham gave Jewish kids a chance; he gave Jews an opportunity to get in. The [financial] industry is very different now.”
sons after him, Thomas Graham. Irving says, “I think most people model their behavior by people they admire tremendously. It was a rich man’s business in those days and it was certainly anti-Jewish. Benjamin Graham gave Jewish kids a chance; he gave Jews an opportunity to get in. The [financial] industry is very different now.”

He then pointed to a photo of an oil painting of Graham commissioned by Buffett. This photo was squeezed in amongst several others pinned to his corkboard, most of them exhibiting his pride in life, his family.

Irving began his career in 1928, less than a year before the start of the Great Depression. Although you may think that quite unfortunate, Irving made very wise choices and had become a very successful man.

The 106-year-old chairman

Irving founded his current investment company, Kahn Brothers Group, Inc., with two of his sons, Thomas and Alan, in 1978. Although currently Thomas runs the business, which has about $700 million under management, Irving, the chairman, still works 5 to 6 hours every weekday and sits in the spacious corner office. Irving is still very involved in the firm’s investments and reviews many of the investment decisions with Thomas.

On his desk sits a computer and two of his favorite newspapers, The Wall Street Journal and the Financial Times. He apprised me that his favorite read is The Economist, which he used to have shipped over from England “for two and a half dollars.” Back then, he
“It is important to read non-fiction and continue to learn and explore. This keeps you young and mentally alert.”

Humble pie and so diversified

During our interview, Irving continuously stressed how vital it is to help people around you, to have diverse interests and a widespread curiosity. He passionately described his enormous library filled with books in his New York City home. “It is important to read non-fiction and continue to learn and explore. This keeps you young and mentally alert. Use your libraries.”

He spoke of the progression of women during WWII. “As men were going to war and taken away from their jobs, suddenly women were needed to fill their spots. They learned to type as well as other skills for positions that were previously unavailable to them.” This reminded Irving of his beloved wife, Ruth, a very educated woman with whom he was wed for 69 years. Ruth died 11 years ago.

According to his staff, Irving is extremely humble. One staffer quipped, “in the midst of a conversation outside of the office building, Mr. Kahn said, ‘I have to run, the bus is here,’ as he literally ran to catch the bus. Even in his late 90s, Mr. Kahn often rode the bus to and from work. He could have owned the bus.” In 2003, a major blackout occurred throughout Manhattan. As the elevators were not in service, Irving had to walk down 22 flights of stairs. It was after
He describes his personality as “going with the tide although my tide is different.”

that incident that his legs began to fail, relegating him to a walker and eventually a wheelchair.

Like most of the centenarians in this book, Irving does not bemoan life’s challenges nor does he dwell on the past. He describes his personality as “going with the tide although my tide is different” and always looks toward the future (also characteristic of a veteran investment analyst).

When I asked him about the market, Irving replied, “doing what you’re passionate about is much more important than worrying about what will happen in the market.” Irving was not interested in going on about the subject; however, he has been quoted as saying that much of the unrest in the industry is due to “a bunch of gamblers going crazy on the floor of the exchange. Wall Street has always been a very poor judge of value.”

At 106, Irving shows no signs of retiring, even though two of his three sons have already done so, one of them at literally half his age.

### REACHING 100 & BEYOND!

#### Lifestyle

| General health | Irving’s health has been excellent his entire life. He has never had a heart attack, stroke, cancer or any other serious illness. |
| Smoking        | Smoked until he was in his 40s but quit cold turkey when one of his sons began emulating his habit. |
| Alcohol        | An occasional social drink in his earlier years. |
Nutrition

Irving “enjoyed home-cooked family dinners, chicken soup and a variety of foods.” Although he didn’t think much about a specific diet he always ate moderate portions and was always concerned about his weight. He was a bit overweight, but never obese.

Physical activity

Irving was very athletic in his earlier years, playing tennis, swimming, sailing and other sports. In recent years he’s had no regimented exercise “except occasionally using light dumbbells” and while in his 90s he would sometimes walk the 20 blocks to work.

Current interests

Irving works every weekday in his office from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. researching the market, and is a voracious reader of “purely non-fiction.” He also enjoys reading The Economist, Financial Times and The Wall Street Journal daily.

Family

“I speak with my family every day.” Irving has 3 sons (one who runs the company), 7 grandchildren and 11 great-grandchildren. He still lives in his apartment in Manhattan with the assistance of aides.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family history</th>
<th>AGE OF DEATH</th>
<th>CAUSE OF DEATH</th>
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<tr>
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HOW HAVE THEY LIVED SO LONG, AND SO WELL?
The people featured in this book were selected not solely based on their extreme longevity; but for their remarkable vitality in their 80s, 90s and even beyond 100. Living a long life doesn’t necessarily mean living a quality life. These individuals reached this advanced age with health, purpose and vibrancy. They are helping to redefine aging in new and inspirational ways.

This book is not just about reaching 100. Face it, the majority of us will not. It’s about aging with grace and dignity, with purpose and joy—engaging in new social networks, endeavors and adventures that we have never considered before.

Let us explore what these extraordinary individuals had in common and see if perhaps we can incorporate some of their wisdom and lifestyle habits into our own lives.

A mixed bag of genetics in their family

The majority of these centenarians had disease running through their family and managed to avoid it.

Based on the family history noted in each chapter:

- 30% of the centenarians had a parent who lived to 90+ years
- 40% of the centenarians had a sibling who lived to 90+ years
- 80% of the centenarians who had siblings had at least one who died in their 60s or younger from disease, and many of
Gwen Weiss-Numeroff is a former advertising executive turned nutritionist, professional speaker, and lifestyle coach. In 2001, she founded Corporate Wellness of Hudson & Bergen to help companies keep their employees healthy and productive. She also counsels individuals in her private practice in Pomona, NY.

Gwen made her career switch after witnessing too many loved ones succumb to disease and depression far too early in life. Her mother’s sudden death at 70 inspired Gwen to launch a two-year quest to find the secrets to vibrant longevity from those centenarians actually living the dream.

Gwen lives in New City, NY, with husband Bruce and daughters Alexandra and Jaclyn.