

# VARIETY

10,000 TAKES

## Only 8, he's learning life lessons in grandma's nursing home

I worry about exposing my son to so much aging and dying.

By PAMELA SCHMID  
Special to the Star Tribune

"Look, Mom," my son exclaimed, pointing to the yellow sheet of paper tacked to the wall. "Eight people died last month. Eight!"

We were waiting for the elevator, and sure enough, the notice of memorial confirmed that eight residents had died in February, including two on Valentine's Day.

"That's a lot," Eli said with a solemn nod. The elevator door opened and as soon as we got in he began dancing to a Michael Jackson tune he was humming out loud.

A minute later, he was skipping down the third-floor hallway, past the cafeteria worker with a dolly full of dinner trays, past a waving orderly, past a scrum of residents watching "Jeopardy!" in wheelchairs.

By the time I made it to my mother-in-law's room, Eli was already there, asking his "Yaya" (Doris to everyone else) if she wanted to go out to the courtyard or downstairs where he could play the piano for her.

This was no doubt the highlight of Doris' day, and the same was probably true for Eli. But while his devotion to his grandma thrills me, I admit to feeling the occasional qualm. Is so much exposure to aging and dying good for an 8-year-old boy?

When Eli was 4, he had four living



Provided  
Eli visited with his grandma, Doris, at her St. Paul care facility.

grandparents. By age 6, he was down to only one. Doris, the lone survivor, has lived with multiple sclerosis for the past four decades. I understand that standing up she was 6 feet tall. But Doris hasn't been able to stand as long as I've known her. She now gets around on a motorized scooter and needs help dressing, eating and bathing. She has dealt with all of this with as much good grace as humanly possible.

Doris has lived at her St. Paul care facility ever since her husband of 56 years — her sole caregiver for decades — died unexpectedly two years ago. Her new home is bright, welcoming and only a 10-minute drive from our house. The staff is friendly and responsive. There are aviaries and a

flower-filled courtyard, puzzles and plants, pianos and a chapel where concerts are routinely held.

Yet the specter of dying is unavoidable, baked into the walls like paint. Death notices appear frequently near the elevator banks. Rooms empty out without warning. Within a single week last year, Doris lost two of her closest neighbors.

None of this gets past Eli. When he notices a different nameplate on the door, or a newly emptied room, the first question out of his mouth is: "Did Marilyn [or Bernice or Margaret or Josephine] die?" Quite often the answer is yes.

And yet, on a sunny day, instead of riding his scooter or kicking the

See **10,000 TAKES** on E3 ▶

# Only 8, he's learning life lessons in nursing home

◀ **10,000 TAKES** from Eli soccer ball, he prefers to be here, among the aged. His father and I typically bring him twice a week, but he would come more often if he could.

The residents know him by now — by face, if not by name. On his way to his grandmother's room, he often stops to visit Adelle, 92, who has taken to wearing a glittery costume tiara, and with Mary, 94, a lifelong St. Paul resident who favors bright, floral shirts with matching barrettes.

Eli's fierce attachment to his grandma is understandable, but it's more than that. He is fascinated by old people — by the very idea of being old.

About a year ago, he began to ask questions. Why did some people die when they were old, and others when they were younger? "Yaya, when will you die?" he asked. "I'm not planning on going anywhere anytime soon," she told him.

Then he turned the focus to his father and me: "How long will you live? I want you to live forever." We swallowed hard and told him we both planned to be around for a long, long time.

## Finding Verona

About a year ago, the entrance to Doris' nursing home underwent an extensive remodeling. A giant display appeared, featuring photos of eight residents and their thoughts about aging and living life well and their gratitude for their families and friends.

One photo was of a handsome woman with a welcoming smile and a halo of fine, snow-white hair. Her name was Verona, and at the time the photo was taken, she was 99. "Always take advantage of your opportunities," she was quoted as saying.

Passing by the display one day, Eli declared: "I want to meet Verona." From that moment, he was on a mission. He sweet-talked the receptionist into telling him what floor Verona lived on. During visits he would excuse himself to wander the hallways in search of her. But he never could find her. One day, he came back

close to tears. "I think she might not be here anymore," he said after another fruitless search. "I think she might have died."

We were in the courtyard at the time, and nearly as soon as he said those words, the door opened and out came a woman pushing a wheelchair. In it was a much older woman with fine, snow-white hair and a familiar beatific smile.

I nudged Eli. He looked over and, quite literally, gasped. We urged him to go talk to her. He walked across the courtyard, tentatively at first, and introduced himself. He talked to her for well over 10 minutes. Later we learned they'd discussed school, soccer and the fact that they both spoke French.

He returned, beaming. "Verona is 101 now," he informed us.

Since that fateful meeting, we've noticed that Eli no longer asks us when we'll die. If Verona can live into her hundreds, maybe he figures we all can.

Meeting Verona changed something in me, too. I came to understand that I don't need to shield Eli from the uncomfortable truth of human mortality. I can let that truth sink in and germinate. I can watch it blossom into sensitivity and compassion.

Verona was right: Our opportunities are right in front of us, if only we can recognize them.

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