

What Does Life After Forty Look Like for Women?

Honors Capstone Project

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*“I never think about age. I believe your age is totally how you feel. I’ve seen women of 35 who are old and people of 75 who are young. As long as I look after myself physically, mentally and emotionally, I’ll stay young.” -Joan Collins*

I have been interested in the aging process ever since I was a small child. I can remember asking my parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, great-grandparents, and other people older than me what it was like to be their age. My grandparents used to tell me about what life was like when they were young, how they met and married, what it was like when my parents and aunts and uncles were young. As a child, I wanted to be a wife and mother when I grew up, and maybe a teacher, because of everything my older family members had told me about getting older. When your children grow up, when you surpass 20 years of marriage, when your body begins to sag and wither, how do you thrive? Through interviewing eight women, I have gained valuable insight and advice about what it looks like to be out of the twenties and thirties. Four of the women interviewed identified as Caucasian or white, and the other four identified as something other than Caucasian/white. They ranged in age from 40-74 years old and came from all walks of life, past experiences, and current livelihoods. Age, height, weight, and race/ethnicity were taken to paint a picture of the beautiful women who were interviewed. The women were asked questions about aging regarding their physical health, emotional health, mental health, relational health, spiritual health, environmental (cultural) health; they were also given a few final questions about aging in general and asked to give a statement about aging for younger women. As a twentysomething white woman, I don’t know what it is like to be marginalized due to race; I also don’t have the life experience to have seen these changes throughout time. My age has never been a problem when applying for a job or thinking about marriage and children. The women in this paper have experienced these things and so much more. Each woman was given

the opportunity to choose a pseudonym and none of the names in the following text are the given names of any woman who was interviewed; women who declined to choose a pseudonym were assigned one. In my quest for information, I found encouragement and a dash of realism about aging as a woman. The following interviews, formatted as stories, are of real women with real life experience, and are written in the order of the date of interview. I can only hope that as women under 40 read this, they feel empowered and emboldened to live their lives in the way they choose, knowing that they will one day look back and see that they lived a life worth living.

Marjorie is a 46-year-old Hispanic woman of Spanish and Mexican descent. She describes herself as being in fair physical health, standing 64 inches tall and weighing 143 pounds. Throughout the course of our interview, she talked about how much she has grown emotionally, mentally, and relationally since her twenties and early thirties. Marjorie has been married twice and has four sons, three biological and one adopted. Her first marriage was common-law, lasting from the time she was 16 years old through age 22; her second marriage began when she was 26 and has lasted for 20 years. Her oldest son is Hispanic, her two middle sons are Hispanic and Black biracial, and her youngest (adopted) son is Black and White biracial. Marjorie told me that when she was young, she wanted to die at 40 to look pretty in her casket. She had seen her grandmother die at 75, looking old and sick in her casket, and she didn't want that. She told me, with a laugh, that now that she is 46, she couldn't imagine dying so young and that she was so glad to have a whole life ahead of her. In terms of relational health, Marjorie talked about the way that she has grown out of jealousy in her relationships. When she was young, she would worry about her partners talking to other women, but she said that nowadays, she's not too concerned about it. If her husband wants to cheat on her, that's his problem, and she doesn't mind leaving. It seemed like a strong statement at the time, but she

clarified that someone “on the side” may be something they could be mature about and move past. She said that she and her husband both work with members of the opposite sex 8-10 hours daily, so to think of being friends or friendly with someone of the opposite sex. She talked about how having a career also helps with her mental health, stating that she didn’t have financial or emotional stability when she was young. Now that she has a career, and is older and more mature, she has peace of mind. She sees the world differently and has a clearer outlook on her future, despite some of her health troubles. Marjorie developed gestational diabetes at 25 years old, which turned into Type 2 Diabetes in her early 30s. She has trouble controlling her weight, but said that she knew that was probably coming. When I asked her about positive changes to her physical health, she laughed and said, “Going through menopause could be good or bad. It’s good because you don’t have any more ‘stuff’ but the mood swings and all that aren’t good.” Having children took a bit of a toll on her physical and emotional health, as it does for most women, but she says that it was worth it. She has stretch marks, big breasts, and feels like she is still overweight. After having her children, she felt fat and ugly, never pretty enough. She now feels more secure in the way she looks, regardless of the socialization of American culture. Her children are adults and older teenagers, so she feels the stress of hoping that they will make the right decisions and live good lives. As her sons have gotten older, she has grown apart from her oldest son and youngest biological son, her middle son and adopted son are still very close to her. It can be frustrating, she said, to have older teenage and adult children. Realizing that tough love can be the best way to parent has been hard, because Marjorie feels that she spoiled her kids growing up. That said, the current cultural climate doesn’t help with her stress over her children. Since her children are all minorities, three of them being half Black, she feels the stress of the current cultural issues. She cited an experience where her son was stripped and beaten almost to

death by police; her son's demeanor and temperament have changed since then. "I am not against cops; we have good ones and bad ones. I fear for my boys' lives," she told me. That was hard to hear. She said that her next youngest son always painted pictures of himself in preschool as blonde and blue eyed, white, like the other kids. After a while, he started being called names for his skin and hair, and he tried on multiple occasions to scrub his skin off to look lighter. The current cultural climate places a strain on her family, her emotional health, and her religious beliefs. Marjorie appreciates that gay marriage is allowed in all 50 states, and believes that gay couples should be allowed to adopt children, regardless of the fact that she was raised catholic. She said that while she still holds to the catholic beliefs, she doesn't agree with all of them. When she was a teenager, she became pregnant and was shunned by a very strict church. That didn't hinder her from believing in God, it just stopped her from going to confession or going to mass regularly. Marjorie's husband is black and occasionally attends a black church in their hometown. She said that she believes her family to be deeply spiritual, whether religious or not. "Good things always happen when you pray," she said at the end of the spiritual health questioning. Over the course of our interview, I found that Marjorie was basically telling me that everything was different as you got older, but not necessarily bad. There are stressors as we age, but she said that they were all worth it. While the body may begin to deteriorate, the mind stays sharp and you have to appreciate what you still have. At the end of the interview, I asked a few general questions about aging. When asked where she believed true beauty came from—truly—she said that she believed it came from the heart. If a person is giving and caring, that is what beauty is. I asked her if she had any advice to give women in their twenties about aging and getting older. Her response was: *To age gracefully. The more stress you have in your life, the faster you will age.*

Autumn is a 40-year-old white woman, who had a lot of encouragement and an interesting backstory to share with me. She described herself as pretty healthy, although she has no thyroid and permanent lung damage due to covid-19. Autumn stands 66 inches tall and weighs 170 pounds, describing herself as “curvy”. Since her teenage years, she has been curvy, but five pregnancies and three births have changed her frame further. Due to these, she has stretch marks, hemorrhoids, and a varicose vein; she experienced uterine and bladder prolapse after her children were born. All that said, she believes her children are some of the best things that have ever happened to her. Autumn and her husband have a 16-year-old, an 8-year-old, and a 5-year-old. She describes the age difference by saying that her younger two are still obsessed with her (as little kids often are), but her older one has begun to pull away and be in his own world. It is necessary to let go, however, as she tells me “I am doing this to make people I want to be friends with someday.” I loved that motto, and I believe that to be true of raising children. When it comes to whether she feels the pressure to be the perfect mom, Autumn laughed and said she absolutely did not. “It’s [BS],” she said. “Too many moms pressure themselves to be perfect; my job is to make good human beings. When we were first starting, we were super poor, used thrift stores and hand-me-downs. We couldn’t spoil them. My husband does housework and is the perfect parent—patient and all that. I think it’s good for a mom to work hard and her kids to see that.” After hearing this, I felt more encouraged about parenting in my own life than I have in a long time. I thanked her for her thoughts, and let her know I would be sharing them with other young mothers. Another token of great wisdom I found was when I asked her how having children affects (or affected) her body image. She said that it was a negative impact for a very long time. After having children, she didn’t like her floppy belly and sagging breasts after breastfeeding. When she finished her master’s degree, she got an augmentation and now feels

that they are perfect. She did it for herself, not for anyone else, and has been happy with the way it affected her body image. “Society has this narrative of women looking like virgins after having children,” she told me. “But when it comes down to it, we are the only species who believe that a mother has to bounce right back to her pre-baby size.” Her marriage has changed over the last ten years or so as well. When Autumn and her husband married, he was 19 years old and she was 22 years old. They got pregnant quickly and were poor; she said it was stressful and they felt robbed at the time from their fun, young life. Since having children and being married twenty years, she said that her sex life has changed for the better as well. While they aren’t in their twenties anymore, they certainly still feel as sexually young as they could ever be. Her life has changed for the better in many ways, and a direct marker of this is her mental and emotional health. Autumn had a troublesome childhood, by her own admission. She grew up in somewhat of a nomadic family for many years, until her parents decided to settle down a bit. Her mother began going to a conservative church that Autumn believes was more like a cult. The members were super hyper-religious and the view was that no matter what, you’re going to Hell. She decided as a teenager to try everything (alcohol, partying, etc.) because she was “going to Hell anyway”. There were many beliefs that were ingrained in her as a child and teenager that she is working to actively shed. For example, the puritanical culture that many religious institutions uphold- where women have to cover themselves because they might “cause” men to sin. She was sexually assaulted many times growing up, but she held in those secrets from age five through age 21. This upbringing has given her a respect for the #MeToo movement, holding men accountable for their actions, and finally providing freedom for women to speak out. She recommended I watch a film called Promising Young Woman. Of the current cultural climate, she talks about working in women’s health for an OB-GYN with 60% of the patients being

Black. The women she cared for were vulnerable and it was high-stress. They were of a vulnerable population, where the women were scared to sleep at night and just wanted to protect their babies. Between the Trump and Biden race, the covid-19 conspiracy theories, and the insensitive patients she sometimes has to work with, her job can be stressful. As an adult, she sought therapy and was prescribed antidepressants for the trouble she experienced growing up, and now describes herself as a secure person who is capable of getting rid of things she doesn't need. "In your twenties, you are a product of what has happened to you," she told me, describing herself as a hot mess in her twenties. She then said that after that, you choose who you want to be. Her mental health is good currently, except for a few lingering hang-ups, and she feels emotionally stable and secure. Being told that she will get ugly, her boobs will sag, and she will get wrinkles is depressing, but she said that she is looking forward to the wisdom that comes with it. Opening up about her body image security, Autumn said that she is probably a seven or eight out of ten on the comfort scale. She said that she believed true beauty came from confidence—owning what you have and not trying to be someone else. Being comfortable being who *you* are is the key; Autumn said that she liked a sexier, edgier look with a lot of cleavage and makeup. She isn't trying to attract anyone else, she does it for herself. She reminded me that no one is as pretty as they were ten years ago at any point in their life, but they all wish they had enjoyed it when they were. "Stop waiting until you're ten pounds lighter," she said with a laugh. Her advice to young women? *Stop looking around to figure out who and what you're supposed to be and listening to other people. Think about what you want and what you like and show them why that's better. Other people shouldn't have the power to influence and shape what you want to be.*



Janis is a 63-year-old African American woman in fair health, standing 62 inches tall and weighing in at 120 pounds. Her responses to the interview questions were not as long-winded as many of the respondents but still had some very good insight about getting older. Janis has been married for 40 years and has three sons. She grew up catholic, as did her husband, but have since left the catholic faith. Janis attends a non-denominational church in her area, but her husband has stopped going to church at all. That said, Janis believes herself to be appreciative of life, blessed with what she has been given, and loves Jesus. Her marriage is still good. She laughingly told me that they don't party as much as they used to and are homebodies, except going out to eat every so often. They are happy to be retired, have grown children, and pursue volunteering opportunities. She feels closer to her children because they are parents, and she has grandchildren whom she adores. Her mother died years ago, which took a toll on her mental health. She is now on medication for chronic depression and anxiety, and says that has helped her emotional stability, even as the current events rage on. While she is more aware of her surroundings when she goes places, she feels that she is more concerned for her grandchildren. "I have to preach it to my grandchildren," she tells me. "If a policeman stops you, put your hands on the wheel." Growing up in the 60s and 70s, she says her parents never told her things like that and the majority of her classmates and friends were white. At that point in time, she said that they still all partied together and got along, regardless of skin color. She worries for her grandchildren who are "mixed", or Black and White biracial; some Black people don't like them and some White people don't like them, so they may have trouble as they get older. That said, all minority races are feeling the prejudice right now, and Janis sees how it is worse than ever. She hopes for a better future for her children and grandchildren. That said, she believes her outlook on the future to be good. She volunteers at a free medical clinic in her hometown and cooks at a

homeless shelter, which she finds relaxing and to be a positive thing. Although she struggles with osteoporosis and arthritis, among other things, when I asked her if she was looking forward to getting older, she chuckled and said “The alternative I wouldn’t want.” I thought that was a pretty telling statement! Janis keeps up on her moisturizer to avoid wrinkles, doesn’t dye her hair, and wants to age gracefully. This was an encouragement to me, and I’m sure to many other young women—to know that it isn’t necessary to wear makeup and dye your hair in your 60s to be “pretty enough” or stay looking young. True beauty, according to Janis, comes from within. Some people’s personalities are kind hearted, making others feel better about themselves and appreciative of what they have. That is true beauty in her eyes. From my interview with Janis, I learned that being thankful for what you have and caring for those around you is one of the most important things in life. From her responses, I would glean that caring for your family and your community, having a kind heart, and not being hung up on physical appearance are three things that are essential if you want to look back and see that your life was good. *Have kids in your twenties so you can jump on the trampoline and play dodgeball*, she said when I asked for her advice to young women.

JoAnna is a 60-year-old woman who identifies as Native American and Scottish. Her heritage is Brule Sioux, Blackfoot Sioux, Scottish and German. JoAnna’s physical health, in her own words, is basically good, except for being overweight. She is 62 inches tall and weighs somewhere over 200 pounds. As a child, she was adopted. Although she is Native American, she has light skin and for that reason, the State wanted to put her in a white home. Racism, she tells me, against a light skinned person on a reservation or within the Native American community is as bad as it is in White America for minorities. That said, JoAnna feels that the current cultural climate is no better or worse than when she was in her twenties and thirties other than a little

more racism. In the 80s and 90s, she told me, racism was hardly a thing. No one cared about someone's job, race, or religion and socialized with each other anyway. When her children, who are both now adults, she didn't have to bring up race issues; she now sees that her grandchildren will have to deal with it for quite some time. Within her extended family, she has been told that some of her family members are afraid to talk to people of other races because they don't want to say or do the wrong thing. Many of her extended family members are white, and they are walking on eggshells, wondering if they will be able to have a decent interaction with someone of another race or not. JoAnna shared a story about when she was a child in a light-skinned Native American family and they took a trip to Texas to look at a college. JoAnna had never seen an African American person before, but she did on that trip. She remembers her mother telling her "they're darker skinned, but don't worry, they're nice", all the while clutching her purse any time there was an interaction. Her family made a trip to a local laundromat to wash their clothes and there was an African American family there; JoAnna's mother sat in a chair, afraid to move or look around. An older lady asked if she could sit down next to her and help ease her anxiety. She agreed and the women were able to have a conversation about a shared belief they had- Southern Baptist faith. After that, JoAnna realized that we are not all so different. "There is a whole generation of young white kids who are being taught that they're racist or their parents are racist because they are white. Will they be so scared to offend someone to be able to reach out to them?" she said of the way that the race issues are being handled today, adding in that not all people are racist against other races, and that goes for all races. Even with all of these things happening, JoAnna rated her mental and emotional health as very good. She hasn't been able to climb or hike for quite some time, but she does feel more aware of her body and knows what to do when things go wrong with it. JoAnna says she has learned to roll with

things, not get too stressed out, and is more stable. When you're young, she said, everything matters right then and there. That all changes as you get older and get perspective on things.

When JoAnna was in her thirties, she was still raising children and her first husband had mental illness himself. Every day was a battle, and she felt constantly on edge. Now, her children are grown and that husband is gone. Her current husband of 22 years is more stable and supports her, and she has been recovering from the long-term mental health effects of her first marriage. Since her children are older and are parents now, JoAnna no longer feels the pressure to be a perfect mom, but rather to be another adult having an adult conversation with them. When her children were young, she felt a lot of pressure wondering if she was disciplining, feeding, and clothing her children the right way. There was pressure to keep the house, take kids to activities and school, but now, she feels that she just wants to give them advice when they ask for it and otherwise stay out of it. As far as taking parenting advice from other people, she had this to say: "Let it roll over you because people either have a good idea or they don't. If it's good, take it in. If not, dismiss it. You don't have to let it get to you." What a novel idea, that you don't always have to take others' advice. JoAnna does believe herself to be a lifelong learner, however, and has learned from other people in her life. She has specifically learned much from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, where she has found solace and spirituality. As a child, she struggled with traditional Christianity and the traditional Native American beliefs, and had an interest in science. JoAnna became a geologist due to her love of science, and could never quite reconcile her love of science and the Christian faith of her childhood. When she found the Mormon church, she found a group of people who believe that if God created science, He could have followed the rules of science when creating the world. That said, some of the viewpoints and benchmarks from her childhood faith still haunt her. She sometimes wonders if she is

supposed to be an old grandma who sits making baby booties and blankets, like she was taught in the traditional Southern Baptist church of her childhood. The expectations of women in these faiths are old-fashioned and don't fit with today's gender roles and values. JoAnna and her husband don't want to be stuck as the boring grandma and grandpa figures who never do anything or enjoy their lives—they are pursuing activities and hobbies together, including travel, that they are passionate about. “We don't want to retire and eat salted potato chips and watch TV forever,” she told me with a laugh. JoAnna used to be involved in martial arts and weight lifting when she was young. When she was in geology school, they would have to haul equipment across a field or up a slope, and she was strong. Since her body has begun to break down, she has a pinched nerve, and has trouble maintaining her weight, she doesn't participate in these activities. Her thoughts on this? “You can continue to do whatever you want to do if you put your mind to it. I figure I have 30 more good years; I have to do something with it... I am also taking this time to do more, learn more, study more, talk to people. How many people could I help in that time?” Throughout our interview, I heard overtones of strength coming from this woman. As you get older, you learn more about yourself and the world around you. It is important to be strong in your convictions, care for others, and not be idle. In terms of true beauty, JoAnna said it was a combination of the strength of a person's character and philosophy of how one approaches life. Take care of your body and your mind, base your actions on what you know to be true. Treat others with kindness, gentleness, a firmness that is not mean, and that is internal beauty. If you contribute to your community—raising a family, be kind to your neighbors and strangers, and care for those around you—then you show true beauty. “I see lovely young women who don't feel good about themselves, who seem depressed all the time, and who don't interact with people. And I've seen people who were not ‘a looker’ but they're

fantastic people and it's got to be a combination of all these. Can't narrow it down to one thing."

I so appreciated her thoughts on this, and when I asked for her advice for young women, she said *Don't be afraid. Just keep going. Live your life to the fullest. Give back where you can. And let the rest take care of itself.*

Hana is a 40-year-old Mexican woman in excellent health, standing 60 inches tall and weighing 120 pounds, with an amazing redemption story full of encouragement. Hana grew up in Mexico. In Mexican culture, women are already seen as second-class citizens, which causes domestic violence and abuse to happen consistently. She became pregnant at 16 years old and got married immediately, as is custom in Mexico. That young man was abusive and immature, had no communication skills other than abuse. After a year, she divorced him. This made her "less than trash" in Mexico, since she was already a woman and a young mother and now divorced. Shortly after that, she got together with an older man. They both wanted kids and became pregnant almost immediately. She never married him, and shortly after he became abusive as well. She moved to the United States, believing that she would never find someone who would love her. She lived on the streets for a short time, but then met a man who rescued her from it and treated her like a queen. She married him and got her green card to stay in the United States. He was a drug addict and an abuser, but Hana got pregnant anyway and had her youngest child. After he abused her badly enough to land himself in prison, she divorced him as well. Having survived so much abuse with three young children, Hana thought that she was done with relationships. Not long after that, she met her third husband. He was a good man who loved her kids. After a few years, they began to drift apart because she was still young and driven, wanting a career and experiences, and her husband was older and just wanted to settle down. She didn't date for a while after that, but eventually began going on dates again; she dated the same

man for about 6 years, but broke it off about a year prior to our interview. Throughout her life, she has lived with oppression and abuse. Her children, on the other hand, have had nothing but a mother who loved them. She never tried to be the perfect mom because she didn't know what that even looked like. On the other hand, she had to work all the time and move around, so she had a hard time raising her kids. She remembers sitting and crying in the bathroom at times because it was so tough, but says that it has become so much better than it was. She did want to be there for her children more. She was a single mom almost all the way through her children's lives, and she wonders if her children resent her for that. Her children are 23, 20 and 18 years old—all adults and all living wonderful lives so far. Hana describes herself as the traditional Mexican mom—caring for her children in every way, allowing them to have all the freedom they can have, and wanting them to do better. “I went from an abused immigrant to looking for opportunities. I got a job with opportunities, finished school, and provided for my kids to be independent. I am a very happy person.” Hana has truly lived the American dream, despite all the things she has been through. Her emotional and mental health and stability are greater now than they have ever been. Since her twenties, when she was a young, abused woman, she has made a complete 180, as she put it and is happier than she has ever been. She began focusing on her mental health about ten years ago and it has brought many positive changes to her physical health and self-esteem. Although she had three large babies (all more than 8.5 pounds), she was able to bounce back a bit, and opted for a tummy tuck and augmentation when she was younger. She realizes now that looking a certain way wasn't what would make her happy, it was accepting herself for who she was. She began a journey to discover what she loved about herself, began to accept herself, and looks at the good decisions she has made in life rather than the mistakes. “Makeup, alcohol, and plastic surgery don't make you happy. It may be covering up what's

inside, but if you're going to do it, make sure you're doing it to be 'happier' because you're already happy," she told me. Her decision to leave the catholic faith has been a huge hallmark of her recovery from the abuse and socialization as a second-class citizen that she faced in Mexico. In the catholic church she was raised in, which she admits was more of a cultural thing than religious thing, she was shunned for getting pregnant so young and the priest refused to baptize her children. When she got older, her mother became a born-again Christian, as she put it, but said that she has become quite the zealot; her mother's husband is a pastor and hypocrite. Hana feels that she has a relationship with God in and of herself, and that she doesn't need an organized or institutionalized church for that. She knows she is a good person and isn't interested in being told otherwise; she now has the strength to stand up for herself. When it comes to the cultural climate, I was interested to hear her thoughts. She came to this country as an immigrant, she wasn't brought up in the same way we are in America. Coming to the US as an adult, she was able to see some of the oppression and racism firsthand; she didn't speak any English when she came to the country. Her perspective of diversity hiring and the current women's rights and minority rights movements was this: "Now, the idea is that as long as you're a woman or ethnic, you get opportunities. Whether you earned it or not. And that's not right; I don't agree with that. Why take pride in being 'the first woman to do...'? It's diminishing the ability or confidence that we have in women. I'm clearly Mexican, I have an accent, but it doesn't affect my abilities." I thought that was a very strong statement coming from someone who could have so easily been angry and spiteful. When it comes to her children, she has had trouble with her son in school. He would get in trouble and teachers, counselors, and other outsiders would tell him that he was more at risk of getting into trouble than his white counterparts because he was a minority. While she didn't like that, she knew it was somewhat true. She cites a time when her son was stopped



by police and interrogated because he fit the description of someone in an active crime investigation. It could have been a scary situation, but he complied with their questioning and requests for search, and nothing happened. Hana knows that the universal goal is unity but says that she sees the current culture as one that pits people against each other, whether they want it or not. One way or the other, Hana wants to just be happy in her life as a Mexican immigrant in America. She talks about how she does not plan to get fillers or Botox or other procedures like that, because she is very expressive and enjoys the way she looks. “I would much rather have wrinkles and still be happy with me... I remember my grandmother being OLD, even though she was only in her 50s.” The woman had lived a hard life in Mexico and it showed. When women get older, they inevitably hit menopause at some point or another, and that is something that a lot of women struggle with because their reproductive years are over. When it comes down to it, Hana knows that that is not what makes her a woman, and in fact, it doesn’t matter whether a woman ever has children. Even if she doesn’t, she is just as much of a woman as anyone.

Finding that peace is part of her quest for finding the beauty and acceptance of herself. Accepting what you have, making a true effort to be your best, and having a goal for your life are part of true beauty, Hana said. She then said “Love who you are is BS—you have to love who you are but you have to have some kind of goal. If you always just love who you are, you become complacent with everything.” Hana demonstrated that having a goal for your life, whatever it may be, and doing everything you possibly can to reach it (whether that means removing yourself from abuse, taking care of your body and mind, or finding acceptance for yourself) creates a life worth looking back on. Her advice? *The decisions and actions of today build the you of tomorrow. Good or bad, they’ll become part of you. Whenever there is the opportunity to*

*make a decision, that's something to consider: is this something that I want to be a building block of tomorrow's me?*

Wren is a 70-year-old white woman in excellent health; she is 61 inches tall, weighing in at 118 pounds. She has been married to the same man for 51 years and has two daughters in their 40s. In terms of her physical health, she said that she now has more wrinkles, her hair is totally gray, she's had fluctuation of weight, and some age spots have developed. When we did the interview, Wren and her husband were in the process of selling their home of 40-some years and moving to a new city where both of their daughters, sons-in-law, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren live. Due to the move, her emotional and mental health were being strained a bit by the stress of it all. She considers herself to be someone who gets things done the right way at the right time, so to be at the mercy of others is hard for her. The day we had our interview, she had this to say of her emotional stability: "Most days, I'm really stable. Yesterday I had a meltdown because of a situation with moving... I've learned to try not to let emotions take over. I try to think things through and analyze the situation. I realize that just because I'm feeling a certain emotion, that's not an indicator that it will be traumatic or bad or good. The emotions are there but they don't control the situation." This just goes to show that you can learn new things, even in your 70s, and that we all have to take things in stride if we can. Wren reckons she is more go with the flow. She used to always react, wanting to control or change things, but that she has learned that it is okay if things don't always turn out the way she would choose. Some of this tenacity and reactionary personality may come from the fact that Wren and her husband ran a successful business for over thirty years, retiring early seven years ago due to health concerns with her husband. Her relationship with her husband has always been stable and strong, and since the stress of running a business has been relieved, it has been more relaxed. In terms of her

relationships with her children, grandchildren, and in-laws, she described them to me as those of mutual respect. She respects her children's decisions and they respect Wren and her husband's decisions. If advice is needed, it is sought, but it is never forced from either side. Since both of her daughters and almost all of her grandchildren are adults, there is a different dynamic than when they were children, but it has been a positive one. Having good relationships with her family is something that has influenced the move to a new town, considering that the hometown where they have lived for so long doesn't have a strong community anymore for them. Wren and her husband were involved in a local church for a few years, but the church began to go downhill and then covid-19 took the opportunity to meet with a church community away. Wren grew up in a very catholic household and raised her children with catholic influences (Christmas and Easter only). When she was in her 50s, the Berean church that her daughter and son-in-law went to planted a church in her hometown. She is looking forward to finding a new community within the new city she will be living in. Another thing she is looking forward to is a new cultural climate and mentality in the community. She believes that the current climate is much worse than it was when she was in her twenties and thirties. "I think people in politics are way less respectful of each other and way less respectful of differing opinions," she told me. She believes, also, that the Black Lives Matter movement is mostly positive—something that needed to happen for a long time and hasn't. She also brought up the current hate crimes against Asians, which she believes is due to the "Kung Flu" covid comments from the previous President. Over the course of her life, she has seen so much in the world that has changed. When I asked her about the aging process as a whole, she said, "Aging just happens and you can't stop it, so don't make a big deal about it. I can still do and be whoever I want to be. Aging doesn't define me; I'm still the same person whether I'm 69 or 29." She isn't necessarily looking forward to getting older, but she

wouldn't want to go back to her twenties either. Seeing people dying at 74 or 76 is hard because it's not that far off, but she said that it's not an old age thing either; at every age, there have been other people who have died from things. Being willing to let go of your own agenda and control can be an integral part of learning more about yourself, from what Wren told me, and I noticed a common theme: relax and go with the flow. True beauty, she told me, comes from inside and is evidenced in the way you treat other people. *When you think back, remember that you made the best decisions you could with what you knew at that time*, she told me when I asked for her advice.

Lacie is a 52-year-old white woman in good health, standing 67 inches tall and weighing 140 pounds. She was raised catholic, has five children, and is married to her third husband. Due to having five cesarean sections and a hysterectomy, she has experienced something positive—weight gain. While most women would be dismayed over this, Lacie believes she was always way too skinny growing up and no matter what she did, she could never gain weight. Her children are all adults now, the oldest being 33 and the youngest being 20, so she has been an empty nester for some time. Lacie was afraid of being seen as the bad person who got a divorce with her first husband (who is the father of her children), but she had familial support throughout the process which helped to remove the stigma. She doesn't believe it changed her valuation of marriage either, as she has been married twice more since then. Lacie and her current husband have been married about 10 years now, and their relationship is positive and comfortable. She feels that she has maintained her independence well, but also feels closely connected to her husband. Her husband's supportiveness has led her to come back to a faith of some kind, she says. She now has someone who won't make fun of her for finding faith in something, and that is something she cherishes. Lacie wouldn't consider herself religious, but spiritual; she connects to

nature and talks to trees, rocks, and other natural things. She knows of a higher power but doesn't know what exactly it is, which she believes help people create their own realities. Part of that reality is the current cultural climate, which is "a lot worse" in her words. She told me that she believes there is turmoil within society. When she was in her twenties and early thirties, if someone offended you, you called them on it, worked it out and then went for a soda. Back in the day, people banded together and raised money for AIDS. Now, everyone disagrees and movements have begun; people have to create a movement about everything these days. Lacie avoids politics because of how polarizing they can be, but working as a manager in healthcare, she has to deal with a lot of it anyway. One positive thing she has found with the covid-19 crisis, while it wreaked havoc on the healthcare industry, is that families are spending more time together. This affected her relationship with her husband as well, considering that they were somewhat locked down together. Emotionally, she is stable and told me that she doesn't believe her happy is as happy as it used to be or her sad as sad as it used to be. She struggled with depression in her first marriage and had low self-esteem. Now, she is confident and not afraid of failure; she doesn't always feel as emotionally connected to things or get as much joy out of things as she used to, but she said that she handles stress much better than before. This is a positive thing for her, and for her family. Now that she is older, she feels that she is allowed to be stronger and more independent, stating "Independence is more accepted when you're an older female than when you're younger." That said, she did say that once you are a mom, you're always a mom, and you do want to be a good example for your kids. What you're doing and how your kids see you is important, she said. She is looking forward to the future, maintaining good relationships with her kids, being an awesome grandma, and she said "I still have a lot of love still to give and experiences/stories to share." Becoming an independent woman, at any age, is a

positive thing and it is important for women to know that they can live whatever life they want to live—that is what I learned from my interview with Lacie. The way you treat other people and see yourself is where beauty comes from, according to her, and she said if you can look in the mirror and think you look good, that's great. Then, you should try to emit that energy to others and make them feel good about themselves. I asked her about her advice to young women, and she said *Don't be afraid to be who you are. You'll be surrounded by people who love you for that.*

Halen is a 74-year-old white woman who stands 63 inches tall and weighs 150 pounds, describing herself in good health. She was my final interview, and she shared so much of her backstory that I wasn't sure I would be able to include all of it, but it was so inspiring. Halen began by talking about her teenage years, where she was very thin. After two marriages and six children, she was self-conscious for a long time about her body and carrying the extra baby weight in her butt didn't make it any better. When her second husband came along, he loved her butt and made a point to let her know that. She has been more comfortable and secure in her body ever since. She said that now she feels proud of her body and proud of her stretch marks because they are proof that she gave life six times. In her twenties and thirties, she was less confident in herself as a person, especially being in the process of raising young children. Her first husband was in the military, so they were very poor unless he sent money back to them, and this caused a lot of stress for her as a mother. She was raised catholic, like many of the women I interviewed, but she couldn't wait to get out of the catholic church when she turned 18 and moved away. She never got along with the priest or many of the members of the catholic church, so she was always searching for something else. In her own words, she went straight from her parents' house to her first husband's house, only two weeks after high school. Halen's first

husband was a couple years older than her and verbally/emotionally abusive; he would often tell her that she was lucky he would have her because no one else would. After both Halen and her first husband put in applications for the same position at an employer and her husband never got a call back, he became upset. Halen had three interviews and eventually was hired for the position, infuriating her husband. He did everything he could to make her quit, but she realized that she could provide for herself and her children, and that was a self-esteem boost for her. Six months later, she divorced him and their four children spent the usual custody arrangement between both parents. In her mid-thirties, she met her second husband, who was always supportive of her. Her second husband was considerably older than she was, but they ended up having two children together and then getting married. She began traveling with her second husband and their two children, living in an RV and selling their house, shortly after their second child was born. They went to a lake in Nevada where there were wild horses, went from fishing hole to fishing hole, and then landed in Mexico for the winter one year. They loved it so much, they decided to stay in Mexico for a few years. Her second husband owned a gold mine and a pig farm in Mexico, so they had business and plenty of time. A young woman whose family they knew asked if she could take their two children to VBS, and Halen agreed. She then asked if she could take their kids to church, and Halen said they could, if she went along. The young woman took her to a non-denominational church and that was where she found God again; it felt like she was coming home. She has been heavily involved in a church in her hometown ever since, including engaging in a small group with other women. After a while, her husband began to have trouble with his heart, and he got prostate cancer. A series of heart attacks happened in a year, and eventually he died. "He actually died sitting at the kitchen table eating breakfast," she told me, with a sad smile. Halen said that she feels confident in her relationship with her children and

doesn't need to date or remarry to feel secure. She has 19 grandchildren, 4 great-grandchildren and two more on the way. She does wonder about the future for her grandchildren, especially with the current cultural climate being the way it is. When I asked her about it, she said everything was so much worse, divided, and totally polarized. "if they would just shut up and listen to each other with an open mind..." she began, "it's to the point where if you don't think exactly like someone else, you're evil or hated. I hate to see that." She has strong views on some subjects, but also believes that all people have a right to life on their own terms. Halen said some things are hard to reconcile, like her Christian faith and the gay rights movement; she has friends who are gay and transgender who are wonderful people. She doesn't believe it is up to her to condemn or judge them, just to listen to their point of view and agree to disagree. Another thing she feels strongly about is the Black Lives Matter movement. She hears a lot of people say things like "I don't see color" and believes it to be wrong and insulting. She values the culture and experiences that her Black friends come from, while she doesn't understand all of it. Throughout the years, her life has changed in many ways, including physical aging. Something that really stuck out to me was when she said "People always say that they want to be able to do what they used to be able to do—but there are just things you can't do. Accept it and make the best of it. If you can't jog anymore, enjoy your walk." She talked to me about how it is important for women to remember that they still have plenty to contribute once they are past forty. "We need to be sharing our knowledge with younger women, supporting them, acting as mentors, whatever we can do to help them. Maybe teaching them to cook, helping with kids, pouring out our wisdom in supporting younger women... too many older women judging rather than mentoring." She said that she looks forward to encouraging and helping young women to live lives they will look back on and know were good. I asked her whether she was looking forward to getting older, and her



response was “Beats the alternative!”, with a laugh. A major theme I heard throughout our interview was that it’s important to know who you are and live your life in whatever way you can. True beauty, in her opinion, comes “from within”, plainly and simply. When I asked for her advice for young women about aging or getting older, she told me: *Don’t fear it. There’s a lot of life to look forward to. The older you get, hopefully the more comfortable you get within your own skin and accept yourself the way you are. One of the things about getting older that I like so much is that I can get through it—I can do it. I can handle anything that comes along.*

When I began this project, I wanted to get more information about aging. After doing all of the interviews, I realized that this was such an encouraging process. While I did learn about the ups *and* the downs of aging (sagging, weight fluctuations, etc.), I learned that women don’t peak before 40 and then dwindle out from there. The women I interviewed were strong, capable, stable, and full of wisdom. Regardless of whether these women were married once or three times, regardless of how many children they had, and regardless of whether they had a career or stayed home, they were all equally important. When it comes to the physical, emotional, mental, relational, spiritual and environmental/cultural health we spoke about, the women all had a different set of experiences and answers, but I found strength, solace, and encouragement in all of them. As a young woman, I had many experiences that shaped who I am now. As a teenager and through high school, I had trouble with my self-esteem, which was made worse by an abusive marriage. After leaving said abusive marriage, I began to rebuild the self-esteem that had been breaking down for ten years. The women in this paper talk about the way that their bodies changed after having children, and how their esteem was affected. On top of this, as we age, our bodies begin to change. Being someone who always had trouble with my body image, I hope to use the knowledge from these interviews to build a strong foundation of love for my body, no

matter what state it is in or how old I am. Regarding my emotional and mental health, I have been making changes since my young adulthood that will help me build a good future. In this season of my life, I am a young wife and mother, and a college student. I struggle with being stressed out about getting my homework, housework, and homemaking duties done in the small amount of time I have. Interviewing these women, I realized that life is short, and your kids are only young for a little while. The house can be a little messy, my kids can have a little freedom to roam, and I can take time for myself when I need to. Taking time out of my day to be thankful for everything I have, including my health and wellness, my family support, and the friends that I have, is crucial. Appreciating the experiences I have had, while they were not all enjoyable or healthy, is something that I find I have to do so that I don't have regrets. Without those experiences, I would not be the strong, confident, bold young woman I am today. I look forward to getting older. Being 30 has such an appeal to me, hitting fortysomething and being an empty nester sounds even better, and retiring in my sixties with the man I love sounds like a dream. My hope for this paper, though long-winded and descriptive, is that other young women will read it and begin to think about their future. In imagining the future, I hope these young women look forward to their forties, fifties, sixties, and seventies, knowing that good things are ahead. To end this, I'd like to encourage other young women with a quote from Ann Landers:

*“At age 20, we worry about what others think of us. At age 40, we don't care what they think of us. At age 60, we discover they haven't been thinking of us at all.”*