

SPANISH FLU SURVIVOR, COVID PATIENT CELEBRATES BIRTHDAY 106

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
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‘A FLICKER OF LIGHT, HOPE’

A lot can happen to a person in a year.

Imagine experiencing the four seasons, holidays, and all the sights, sounds, and feelings of a year over 100 times.

That is what Gallup native Lubica “Luby” Grenko did this week. She celebrated her 106th birthday on Aug. 4 while living at the Gallup branch of Little Sisters of the Poor, an international

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congregation of Roman Catholic women founded in 1839 by Saint Jeanne Jugan.

Granddaughter Misty Tolson spoke with the *Sun* Aug. 5 about the long life of her grandmother.

“My grandma lost her mom and sister back in 1918 to the Spanish Flu,” Tolson said. “My great grandfather was a widower, so he then took his three kids to Croatia. Not only that, he was bipolar. And a man being left with three children to raise at that time was rough.”

Luby was born in Gallup, but moved to Croatia after her mother and sister died from the Spanish Flu in 1918. She moved back at the age of 14 and remained in Gallup through the Great Depression and World War II, and now the COVID-19 pandemic.

Luby was married for 66 years to one of the last independent coal miners in the area, Tolson said. Tolson’s great grandfather owned a bar that has been in Gallup to the present day, where it is now known as the Third Street Tavern.

She spoke about the enthusiasm her grandmother carried throughout her life.

“She loved bowling. She would bowl three times a week,” Tolson said. “She has always had this amazing, happy disposition.”

Her grandmother’s cheerful nature would be put to a sizable test when she contracted COVID-19 and tested positive on April 29.

“First, she had a fever, then she had a cough,” Tolson said. “The nurses and aides were worried she wouldn’t make it, especially since 12 people from Little Sisters died around that time.”

But despite the bleak circumstances around her, Tolson said her grandmother did not allow

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anything to get her down for long.

“She continued her positive attitude after her diagnosis,” Tolson said. “Every day she kept getting stronger as she rested. The [nurses and aides] would text me on certain days and say, ‘She was a huge inspiration and our light of hope.’”

Tolson said her grandmother would just start singing in Croatian.

As of Aug. 5, Tolson said her grandmother appears to be rallying and was in great spirits when the two last spoke.

“When we were singing to her yesterday [Aug. 4], it was bittersweet that I couldn’t be in there with her,” she said. “When I asked her how she felt about being 106 years old, she said, ‘Oh boy!’”

Normally, the family would have a Croatian picnic for Luby, which was not possible this year due to the pandemic and her diagnosis.

While the picnic was unable to happen, Tolson once again pointed out her grandmother’s upbeat outlook despite the challenges in her life.

“She broke her first hip when she was 99, and then she broke her second hip when she was 102,” Tolson said. “When she was going in for surgery after her second hip broke, I asked her, ‘Grandma, do you want to go to heaven and be with grandpa?’

“She looked at me and said, ‘No. Do you want me to?’ She just had such a will to live,” Tolson continued. “Most people at 102 years old, they might just give up when they break a hip. But she had that positive attitude through that [incident].”

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Given the difficulties she has endured in the past, along with the violent, unpredictable nature of COVID-19, Tolson said it is a full-blown miracle her grandmother is still here.

From what the nurses and aides at Little Sisters have told her, Tolson also thinks her grandmother has an important lesson to teach in these trying times.

“People just need to have a good attitude right now,” she said. “Those people said my grandma was a flicker of light and hope to them. You’ve got to have some happiness through this time.”

By Cody Begaye
Sun Correspondent