

Love reaches across the generation gap

Lessons in life and God are taught to incarcerated youths by 84-year-old woman

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When Ruth Newcomer's brilliant blue eyes latch on to yours, get ready. She's about to drive her point home.

It doesn't much matter if you are a juvenile at Barnes Hall, a newspaper reporter, a friend or a reader of her latest book — the eyes are arresting and her message poignant.

Newcomer is a woman with a mission — an 84-year old woman — to whom age is no obstacle. Her life is and has been devoted to doing things she believes are "worthwhile" — things that have eternal value.

That's why the Lititz woman recently published "Special Parables," an anthology of her newspaper articles that has a spiritual message. She also plays organ at her church each Sunday and climbs up and down flights of stairs every Friday to prepare food for Meals on Wheels.

On Tuesdays, Newcomer goes to Barnes Hall to lead a Bible study for any of the incarcerated teen-agers who want to come.

No old-lady driving for Newcomer, she zips through Lancaster traffic on a recent Tuesday, one shortcut to another, to be there on time. Bill and Pat Howell, friends from her church, join her.

About nine teens are waiting for them in a circle. Long hair, short hair with blond tips, beards, hard eyes, soft eyes, cocky faces, slumping shoulders, girls and boys of all backgrounds and colors.



Every one has an arrest record — and a smile and a hug for Newcomer and the Howells.

Newcomer's eyes, which up until now have been intent with the details of getting here, soften as she greets the group. Outsized by most of the teens and out-sounded by the room's air conditioner, Newcomer makes a brief introduction and gets them started playing a team game.

Each team member must eat a Saltine, swallow it, whistle, blow up a paper bag and then pop the bag, three times, before the other team's members. Showing her age for a brief moment, Newcomer sits down to watch the show.

Her eyes laugh as she watches them and listens to them tease each other. She relaxes for a few minutes.

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Ruth Newcomer
Author

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For Newcomer to be at this place at this point in her life is part of a personal and spiritual transformation that took place in her 30s.

At the time, Newcomer said she was a "social butterfly" whose week-day life consisted of playing bridge and attending parties. She was married to Warren Newcomer, who became the president of Wilbur Chocolate Factory, and she had two children. But, she said, she wasn't happy in life.

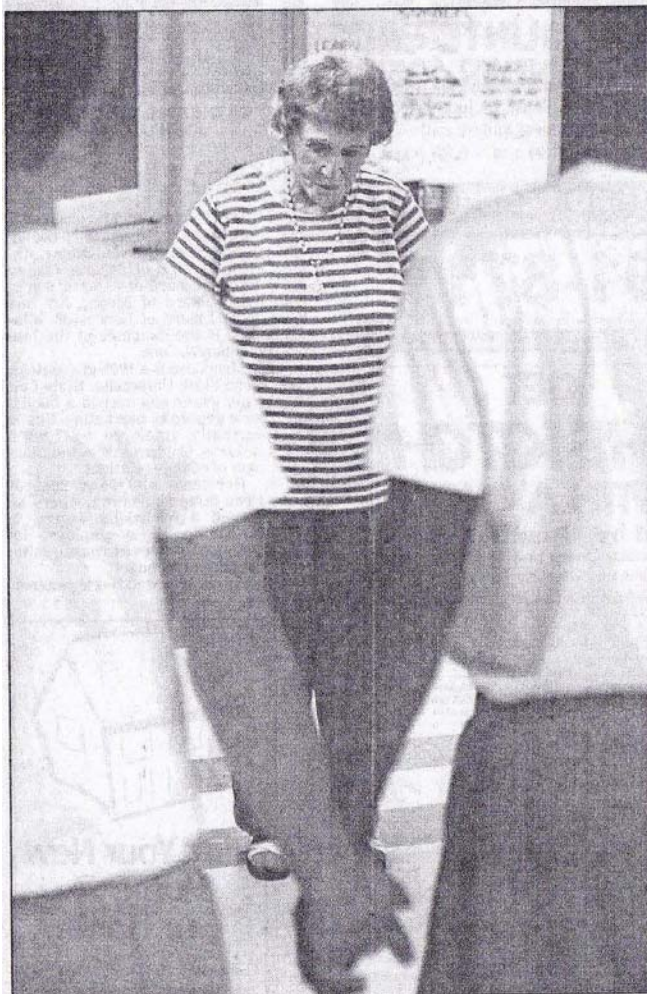
After a convicting sermon, she concluded she was wasting her life on "selfish pleasures." "I dropped out of everything I was selfishly engaged in and started doing things that had meaning in life," she said.

One of the first things she did was write weekly columns for the Lititz Record Express. The columns, which are the substance of her new book, focused on day-to-day things she encountered, like interruptions, gates, laws, languages. Newcomer used those items to make a spiritual point in the columns.



Intelligencer Journal photos by Dan Marschka

"You haven't had a fair chance," Ruth Newcomer says to a 15-year-old who lived on his own before getting in trouble with the law.



Ruth prays for wisdom for the teens in her Bible study group at Barnes Hall.

She used this same approach with the Barnes Hall teen-agers. Finished with the game, they circle around Newcomer as she talks to them about investments — investments in land, baseball teams, hockey teams, race horses, time and people.

Then she tells the Biblical story of the farmer who gave three of his workers "talents (money)" before he went away on a trip. The farmer instructed them to use the talents wisely. When he returned, two of them had doubled the money, but one buried it in the ground because he was afraid he would lose it. The farmer scolded him for, at the very least, not putting it in the bank to collect interest.

Newcomer's blue eyes locked on theirs as she prepared to drive home the point. "You are worth something even though you made a mistake. You have to find that talent (ability) and increase it."

Using a passage in Psalms, Newcomer told the teens that God knew them before they were even born and that he has a purpose for them.

"He (The Lord) doesn't give you that talent to waste or to hurt other people. He gives you that talent to help other people." She continued talking for about 30 minutes, switching back and forth between admonitions and encouragements.

"God promises to hold you by the hand and will help you accomplish what you want to do," she reassured them. But, she said, their own hard work will determine their prosperity. "Only a fool idles away his time," she said, quoting Proverbs.

Many of you are in Barnes Hall for dealing drugs, she told them, as several boys smiled knowingly at each other. Dealing drugs will make you lazy, she said, in spite their protests. Not only are you teaching yourself to be lazy, you are helping other people to destroy themselves, she said.

"Staying on the street all night isn't cool, that's stupid," Newcomer said. "I'm 84 years old. If I was on the street all night and dancing in a bar, I wouldn't be here tonight," she said. "The reason I come out here is I care for you kids. I think it's terrible that you are ruining your life."

"You gotta do what you gotta do," a 15-year-old boy said to Newcomer. His mother and father didn't care about him,

he said, so he lived with a family member until that family member went to jail. Somebody had to pay the rent, he said.

A softness spread across Newcomer's face and eyes as she walked to the boy, put her hands on his shoulders and looked deep into his eyes. "You haven't had a fair chance in life," she said.

She told the guard to let her know where he goes after he is released from Barnes Hall, so she can make sure he's being taken care of and not on his own.

After a prayer, pretzels and other treats were handed out. The guard noted with amusement, that Newcomer kept going back to the boy and giving him more pretzels. Newcomer also sat with a girl for a while, listening to her story — another story of person who hadn't had a fair start, she said.

If Newcomer's husband was still living, she said, she would have some of these children living with them when they come out of Barnes Hall.

The teens had kind words for Newcomer. "She has an open mind. She understands people's problems, whether she's been there or not," said one boy, who calls himself a satanist.

"I like her. She's cool," another said.

"She's 84 years old, but she's walking around talking to everyone like she's 16," said another.

What she said about selling drugs making you lazy is true, said one boy who refused to get a job because he always had money. All he had to do was sit at home and deal, he said.

"I talk pretty plain to these kids," Newcomer said before going to Barnes Hall. "You have to make it real to their lives."

That's Newcomer's mission in a nutshell: Everywhere she goes, everything she does is intended to help others and herself put God together with real life.

Her life has been so full of those mission activities, the sherbert on her fruit platter melted as she described them all. Since her renewed commitment to God, she has volunteered at Conestoga View and at the Lebanon Veterans Hospital.

She taught Sunday school classes and went on 15 mission trips to Europe, Japan, Mexico and Africa. After the trips, she took photos and stories from the missionaries to eastern Pennsylvania congregations encouraging them to support the mission work.



Teens show up at Ruth Newcomer's Bible study at Barnes Hall on Tuesday night because she's "straight" with them and because she understands them, they say.

Newcomer used pictures from her mission trips to illustrate many of the ideas in "Special Parables," the book she has wanted to publish for many years. Two of her favorite pictures of children in Mexico and Japan illustrate her article comparing children's characteristics to adults who are children of God.

"I had a lot of drive. I have a lot of energy. A lot of people younger than I sit around and don't reach out to people. When you reach out to people it does something for you," Newcomer said.

She's uncertain about what still is ahead for her. She has ideas about a half-way house, where the children from Barnes Hall "would have a secure place to go where somebody can teach them right."

Someday, she knows she will have a "promotion" or "graduation" to the next life. Until then, she said, she will continue to live by her guiding Scripture: "In all your ways acknowledge Him, and he will direct your paths."

Her blue eyes locked on to make sure the reporter understood.

Ruth Newcomer's book is available at Provident Bookstore. She will also be at Border's Bookstore to sign books on Sept. 24, 2 to 4 p.m.