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Sweet Adelines Stories: Long-time Sweet Adeline Chrissie LaHiff turns 100

Written by: Mary Mamer and Julie Mikulic

Newport, Oregon resident Christina Hutton LaHiff was born May 22, 1920, in Clydebank, Dunbartonshire, Scotland, as the first child of Daniel Hutton and Mary McGregor Melvin. Known as Chrissie to all who know and love her, she has had a long and adventure filled life.

As a young woman, she worked as a nurse in Scotland. In 1941, she married James Blair Blackwood. Six months after their marriage, he was killed as a World War II pilot flying over Germany. She witnessed the bombing of her town of Clydebank by the Nazis where over 700 people were killed. Chrissie was also in London when it was being bombed. She said it was very scary because you could hear the bombs coming but didn't know where they would land.

Sometime in the late 1940's she married John Kerrison Birks in Preston, Lancashire, England. They had a son named Rodney Kerrison. Her husband, John, was a film director and helped make the films, "Lawrence of Arabia" and "The Bridge over the River Kwai." He moved his family from England to Florida and was to join them in the United States but several months later he was killed in Sri Lanka while driving during a monsoon storm after completing his latest film project. It was a difficult time for Chrissie, being with a small child in a foreign country, and without a husband.

She then met and married Louis Edward LaHiff. They lived in Tennessee, where they owned and ran a Hallmark store. Chrissie loved her marriage to Louis, who passed away in 1992. In the mid 70's she joined a small chorus in Clarksville, Tennessee. After singing with them for two years Chrissie and a friend started making the journey to join the Metro Nashville chorus. There she began her love of barbershop singing. She also participated in theater and ballroom dancing. Says Chrissie "I wish I was 90 again so I could do the Highland Fling."

After Louis passed away, Chrissie joined her son who had moved to Salem, Oregon. While there she joined the Cherry City Chorus. Over time, Cherry City made the decision to join with

Willamette Sound Chorus. A few years later, Willamette Sound and Blue Lake Choruses merged and renamed the chorus Pride of Portland. Chrissie and Rod (her son) moved to Newport in 2004 and she then joined the Oregon Coast Chorus. During her years with Oregon Coast she enjoyed giving members tips on choreography. Chrissie sang with the chorus until she was 95 and lead their physical warm-ups. All through the years, she sang bass with a warm rich bass tone. As small as she is you would not expect such a large sound from her, but she could always hold her own and ring chords. Over the years, Chrissie enjoyed decades of singing in six different Sweet Adeline Choruses.

Although her son passed away in 2016, Chrissie has continued to be active in her church and lives independently in a local apartment complex. While she doesn't sing with the chorus, Chrissie still attends chorus performances and parties. She often says, "There is nothing like the Sweet Adelines."

Chrissie is also well known in the community. She was often seen at Fred Meyer during bad weather, where she would walk up and down the aisles for exercise. At 95, she still went to Curves and kept up with many younger members in Zumba classes. At 100, she still walks up and down the stairs to her second-floor apartment and makes trips to Fred Meyer for groceries. The staff know her well and always welcome her to the store.

For her 100th Birthday, she was surprised by a parade through her apartment complex. The parade was led by three Newport police cars with sirens blowing and followed by over 30 cars with members of the Oregon Coast and Pride of Portland Choruses, friends from her church, the apartment complex, and Fred Meyer!

An article in the *Newport News Times* quotes her advice for the next generations.

"Things happen in life that we don't plan," she said. "I experienced the death of a son and three husbands. I lived through bombings in Clydebanks and London. We don't get to choose what will happen to us in this life, but we can choose how to react to it. We just do the best we can do and try to be positive."

*Mary Mamer is a member of Oregon Coast Chorus and is Region #12 Events Coordinator.
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Chrissie in her early 20's and at age 100. She still has that sparkle in her eyes and her distinctive chin.



Chrissie enjoying her birthday parade. She was so excited about her birthday cake, handmade by a member of the Oregon Coast Chorus. It's a cardboard cake with one hundred candles made of rolled dollar bills!