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The Sky is Not the Limit

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"I've always been interested in the sky and the stars. I think we're headed for something different. It's out there," said Audrey Damiani. And then, with the kind of humor that keeps you smiling after 95 years, she added, "We need a new spot."

It's that wry humor and joie de vivre that attracts people to Damiani, and so, when she celebrated her 95th birthday on July 31, it was with a large gathering of family and friends at Barone's Restaurant in Sherman Oaks.

While this party was a little scaled down from that of her 90th birthday, where a couple hundred people were present, her 95th had a special highlight.

Family friends, the Skinners, presented her with a card that informed her she'd soon be taking a helicopter ride. The Skinners, Rick, Patty and son Robert, could ensure the flight would be a good one because Robert Skinner is a helicopter pilot and trainer for Group III Aviation in Van Nuys. (He is also a Canyon High School graduate and a senior at California State University Northridge.)

But wouldn't a helicopter ride be a bit much for a 95-year-old? Not for Damiani. "Not too many years back, I rode in the helicopter down at Ports of Call (San Pedro)," she said.

Early Flight

Damiani was born in the small town of Red Wing, Minnesota, but she said she grew up in St. Paul. Flying was always an interest of hers and at age 15, she, her brother and a friend got to ride in a biplane. "We grew up in the Lindbergh era. There was no question of 'Do you want to, or not?'" she said. "I took a little box camera. We flew over St. Paul."

In 1937 Damiani and her husband Leo came out to California in a Model A Ford. "We called it Henrietta," she said. They stayed in California a few years, until they moved to

New York so her husband could study conducting at The Juilliard School. After he finished at Juilliard, and then served in the U.S. Army, the couple eventually moved back to California. They had one child, daughter Mari. (Mari Wood is an SCV Realtor, and her partner is Patty Skinner.)

The family lived in Burbank and Leo Damiani was a founder and conductor of the Burbank Symphony - being instrumental in the opening of Burbank's Starlight Bowl. He also worked for Warner Brothers and Disney Studios. "I was really happy with his wonderful work in music. He made a lot of people happy," Audrey Damiani said.

When her husband died in 1986, Audrey Damiani moved to the SCV to be closer to her daughter and family. She has two granddaughters and three great-grandchildren and they all live locally.

"It's nice having my whole family near me. It has been wonderful," she said.

Damiani worked in the flower shop at Forest Lawn for 23 years, until she was 85, and during the latter years of that career, she rode the MetroLink train to and from her work. "I worked so long because I was needed and because I enjoyed it," she said.

A Day to Remember

Damiani's helicopter day was a blast from start to finish. First-off she was surprised to learn that her ride to the airport would be in Rick Skinner's 1932 roadster - perhaps harkening back to her first trip to California in the Model A.

With her previous flight experience, Damiani said that the helicopter flight with Robert Skinner at the controls was "not frightening at all, he's a very fine pilot." Yet she said the flight was pretty exciting. The surrounding clear canopy gave her a tremendous view. "I really was in a bubble. I was as comfortable as sitting in a chair at home," she said.

Damiani said the flight really let her know what a beautiful area we live in. "It was wonderful. We flew over the city to Santa Monica, and up the coast to Malibu," she said.

Robert Skinner, 22, said Damiani's composure during the flight surprised him a little. "She was 95 years old and more secure than some people my age who have flown with me," he said.

He explained that taking her flying was special for him. "She's been a family friend, I've known her so long - and she said she'd always remember that birthday. That meant a lot to me," he said.

Thoughts from Experience

In reliving the helicopter flight, and her life, for this story, Damiani was inspired to offer some of her deeper thoughts, gained from all her years. "In my younger life, I thought things were a little softer than today. Today is more shake, rattle and roll," she said.

She explained that her family always had to work hard for everything they had. But she feels this is a good thing. "We all need to work hard for what we have - and to lead, not follow," she said.

Damiani also feels people need to find more love for each other.

"There's so much hatred. I hope we can find an answer for that," she said.

But she did offer her best tip. "A smile will go a long way. Even if you are angry, smile," she said.

Beyond 95?

When asked if she would be flying again, Damiani wouldn't make any predictions. "If my health continues, we'll just go forward and make the world a better place," she said.

And though she doesn't figure she'll be around, she fully expects people will one day be living on other planets.

Her flights above the earth have only touched the possibilities.