

Vital timer

Recipe for longevity

Centenarian's secret: Just keep dancing.

by Sue Masaracchia

At a little over five feet tall — a foot shorter than many of those he square-dances with — Tony Martorana stands out in the crowd.

Although he will turn 100 years old on October 20, there is still a bounce in the step and a sparkle in the eyes of this 38-year resident of Park Ridge. His bald head sports some age spots, but his skin is virtually wrinkle-free. His mind is sharp and his wisdom is reminiscent of the character Dustin Hoffman portrayed in the movie "Little Big Man," remembering a lot of details from his past.

He still walks just about everywhere he goes, regardless of the season, decked out in a fedora and walking cane. He plans on bringing these familiar accessories to his centennial birthday party that his daughters are hosting for family and friends on October 22.

With the program

Martorana has seen a lot over the last century, but television is the innovation that has most impressed him. In his broken but fairly clear English, he credits television with helping him learn things about the world and with keeping him alert.

Then there is his square dancing. Turned on to dancing by a friend he met while learning ballroom dancing, Martorana for the past 15 years has danced once a week at the Park Ridge Senior Center with a group of singles who call themselves the Spare Squares. Everyone knows Martorana, especially the women with whom he innocently flirts. Admittedly very content with his life, he smiles and talks to everyone.

Still self-sufficient, he lives in his own home, surrounded by attentive neighbors, family and his "grocery store and pharmacy friends," Martorana says. By all accounts, he is also very resourceful.

In 1938, for example, when he had dysentery, he took it upon himself to create a cure based on his moth-

er's home remedies. When his physicians could not find a way to cure him, he healed himself on bananas and tea. Before coming up with that remedy, "I thought I wasn't going to live," he recalls.

"Aside from watching TV, he spends a lot of time at [the local grocery store]," says Frank Musiliami, a neighbor and friend of 25 years. "In fact, when he accidentally got locked out of his house one day, he walked to the grocery store and stayed there until his daughter came home from work. Ordinarily, he dresses up and is at the store all the time."

"Use extra-virgin olive oil and lots of garlic and you won't have wrinkles in your face."

Tony Martorana

Musiliami adds, "Everyone knows him and he loves to cook for himself. In fact, he only likes his own cooking so I don't invite him over for dinner. He cooks for me. He's a great cook."

Food for thought

Martorana credits his diet for his longevity. He avoids fried foods, takes vitamins and drinks at least six glasses of



Photo by Joyce Heitler

Tony Martorana has no trouble finding willing square dance partners, like Louise Kobylinski (right) and Amelia Faxel.

water each day. He focuses his diet on fresh vegetables like broccoli and asparagus lightly sautéed with garlic, and on fresh fruit, but he is quick to advise, "Use extra-virgin olive oil and lots of garlic and you won't have wrinkles in your face."

He shuns processed foods and warns others to avoid processed white bread, which he calls "sponge bread," choosing warm, hard-crust bread instead.

"He eats very little meat," says Musiliami, "and eats only produce and foods he cooks himself." He trims the fat off of any meat he does consume.

American dream

His family came from Bagheria, Sicily, near Palermo. Martorana had two sisters, now deceased, and several brothers, all of whom died in infancy and shared his name, Anthony Thomas Martorana. When Martorana was born on October 20, 1900, his family lived in a small house but his father, a stone mason in a quarry, was in the process of building a larger one to accommodate the growing family.

Martorana was the last of his family to leave Italy, arriving in America at Ellis Island on July 4, 1920. Because of the holiday, he was not allowed off the ship until the next day. As a result, he got to see the Independence Day fireworks in New York Harbor. "For those of us on the ship, it felt like a welcome for us," he says.

In Italy, he became a well-known custom tailor, making suits from scratch. Once he arrived in America, he moved first to Detroit before settling in Chicago, where he owned his own shop for 50 years. Once he gave up his store, he worked as a custom tailor out of his home for 17 years. To this day, his proudest accomplishment remains the fact that he learned a trade and ran his own business.

Martorana also is proud of his American citizenship, something he's never taken lightly. He became a naturalized citizen in 1927.

Tony Martorana was the last of his family to leave Italy, arriving in America at Ellis Island on July 4, 1920.

He arrived in Chicago having only completed the third grade. Martorana continued his education by attending night school on the North Side and by reading newspapers, watching TV news and learning about history, especially American history. According to his daughter, Josephine "Jo" Halls, "He was a whiz at math," though she says, "He didn't like school."

Once a card-game aficionado, he gave

up playing poker and pinochle for money after he got married at age 34 to a woman 10 years his junior. He met his wife of nearly 44 years, Constance (called Connie or Bess), while attending a wedding on the South Side. Before Connie's death 22 years ago, he was known to supervise her cooking. "It took her six months to learn to cook right," Martorana says.

His four daughters are scattered around the country, but remain very close to him and to each other. Dot Aumann, 64, is a secretary in Golden, Colo. Park Ridge resident Halls, 62, is a teacher locally. Pauline Cahill, 58, lives in Elk Grove Village and works in human resources, while the youngest, Toni Hernandez, 52, is a beautician in Ft. Worth, Texas. All four are creative and share their father's love of sewing.

Shore thing

The daughters most remember the family gatherings, especially weddings, and trips to the beach. Since neither Martorana nor his wife could swim and a distant relative had drowned in Lake Michigan, it was very important to the couple that their daughters learn to swim.

"We would go to Gages Lake or Lake Zurich and start by wading," Halls says. "They wanted to make sure we knew how to swim." Halls adds, "Sometimes, before air conditioning when it was hot outside, my father would sleep on the beach."

She recalls, "He also insisted that we have spaghetti and meatballs at the beach. My poor mother would make the sauce with meatballs ahead of time and my father would bring a portable stove so she could heat it and boil the water. We'd also have corn and watermelon."

Martorana readily admits that he is very particular. "When we went looking at homes, my wife wanted the fourth house we saw. I fell in love with another one and that's the one we bought," he says.

According to his daughter, Martorana has always been especially conscientious about his U.S. citizenship. "He has always referred to himself as an American of Italian descent and never took his citizenship for granted," Halls says. "He always voted and has wanted to be a good role model."

Halls notes that her father also is very cynical, especially about doctors. However, she says, "He's always done everything in moderation, and has been very forward-thinking, adaptable to new situations and modern technology. We were always the first to have the latest gadgets like an electric juicer."

As someone who was rejected by the military for, in his words, "not being strong enough," Martorana believes, "Stronger people might not live as long." Looking back at his life, he wouldn't change a thing.