

Swiss immigrant still volunteering at 90 years old

Josephine Omlin, 90, says hard work is the key to her longevity

By Kimberly Horg
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Josephine Omlin is a survivor. Her parents, Franz Kuchler and Rosa Imfeld, died when she was a small child. Her mother passed away during childbirth and her father died of the flu shortly thereafter so she was raised by her godparents (and distant cousins), Nicholas and Josephine Kuchler. When she was six, she was taken to the hospital in a horse and buggy because a life-threatening disease called diphtheria and was quarantined for three weeks.

She came to the United States with her late husband, Joe Omlin, in 1938 and has lived in Turlock for nearly 60 years. Omlin is as vibrant as ever and has plenty of energy to help those around her.

Today, at 90-years old, Omlin still works by donating her time to Sacred Heart Thrift Shop, San Joaquin Valley Swiss Club and delivers food to people in need through an organization ran by the Emanuel Medical Center called Meals on Wheels.

"Most people are happy to see people and have someone bring them food. I enjoy helping people and I am thankful that I can still do that."

Omlin was born on March 17, 1914 in Sarnen, Switzerland.

She went to elementary school in Switzerland and took care of her family's brown Swiss cows. During her teen years she worked in a straw hat factory and was a waitress for a year. After sewing for about a year, she began going from house to house to do alterations and to sew new clothes for people.

Just as life seemed to be going well, in 1932 a catastrophic mud slide hit her family's home.

"I'll never forget the sound that it made when it hit the home," Omlin said. "The lower part of the house was full of mud and it went up to the second story window."



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Turlock volunteer

She was caught between two rivers and had to be lifted out by a fire engine, she said.

Six years later, when she was 24, she met her future husband and they were married within six months. Joe came to America prior to meeting Josephine in 1928 to work. He then went back to Switzerland where he found the love of his life, married her, and brought her to the New World with him.

"Finding a job in Switzerland was hard, there was no work there so we decided to come to America," she said. "The paperwork took a long time so Joe wanted to go back to America on a visa to work but I told him that I would not come to America alone and wouldn't marry him if he didn't wait for us both to go."

They traveled on a Italian ship to get to the U.S. and had to overcome sea sickness. When they arrived in New York they were greeted by the Statue of Liberty. They took a train to Los Angeles to find work in the dairy industry. While they were there, they started their own family. Daughters Josie and Maggie were born a couple years apart during the early 1940s. Joe worked for a big dairy in Los Angeles for a several years until they saved up enough money to buy a dairy of their own.

In 1946, the Omlins bought 30 acres in Turlock and a couple of cows. They started a Grade B Dairy and eventually had 30 cows that they would manually milk themselves.

The farm was not economically feasible so they both had to get other jobs.

Josephine went to work for a cannery for

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awhile and then started cracking eggs at Ernie Gemperle Egg Farm, where she worked for 15 years. Working for others was especially hard because Josephine did not know how to speak English until her children went off to school.

"My mother learned to speak English from me," said her oldest daughter, Josie Fernandes. "I didn't know English when I first started school at Hilmar Elementary, but another Swiss student knew English and Swiss so he helped me learn the language and then I taught it to my mom."

She has been attending mass in the morning three or four times a week at the Sacred Heart Catholic Church since she moved to Turlock and has been volunteering at the Sacred Heart Thrift Shop for more than 30 years.

"I am thankful that my god parents were Catholic and raised me to be a good Catholic," she said.

Josephine is the second youngest out of four boys and five girls. She is the only sibling who is still alive, but has relatives she still keeps in contact with in Switzerland. She has visited Switzerland several times since she moved to the U.S.

"I went back to Switzerland last year and saw 265 distant relatives of mine. It was very exciting," she said.

How does one live to be vibrant at 90 years old and still be able to drive and help so many others?

"Take your vitamins and don't drink or smoke," Omlin said. "I thank god everyday when I get up. ~~Hard work~~ is good for the soul. ~~Some~~ kids are too spoiled. Some mothers think that their children shouldn't have to work that hard but hard work doesn't hurt. I had to work hard as a child and I think the hard work made me a stronger person."