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Key to a near-century of living? In new biography, Amherst resident Elsie Fetterman, 97, says it's positivity



Elsie Blumenthal Fetterman at her home in Amherst, with the recently written book about her life. The 97-year-old says remaining positive is the key to a long life. STAFF PHOTO/CAROL LOLLIS

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AMHERST — By the time Elsie Fetterman attended the annual meeting of the American Home Economics Association in Detroit in 1964, where she was presented a distinguished community service award by then first lady Lady Bird Johnson, she was already raising four young children, one of whom had spent a year in a children’s hospital, and aiding a relative who had lost an arm.

As part of her keynote speech, Johnson noted the challenges Fetterman faced, praising her work ethic and resilience, as well as her involvement in her hometown of Danielson, Connecticut.

“Far from restricting her activities because of these family problems, this home economist has gone beyond the call of duty to organize a place of worship for her religious denomination in the community, to initiate and lead a 4-H group, to introduce the National Honor Society in her high school and to serve as the faculty advisor for the student council and the yearbook,” Johnson said in her remarks.



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Sixty years later, Fetterman, now 97 and an Amherst resident since 1979, continues to have the same sense of determination and positivity she had as a young mother, attributing her success to her father.

“I became an overachiever because my father’s expectations of me were so high,” Fetterman says. “It was hard for my father to praise. He never gave me a compliment in my life.”

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But Fetterman maintains optimism, even through tragedies she has endured, losing a grown son in a motorcycle accident in 1986 and seeing her mother die while in her senior year of college.

Fetterman's qualities are captured in a recently published biography titled "The Elsie Blumenthal Fetterman Story... make the lives of others better," with the cover stating, "an inspiring story you will not soon forget." The 200 pages are filled with Fetterman's oral recollections of her near century-long life.

Martin Herman, a Connecticut-based author who wrote the biography, said he met Fetterman at Nutmeg Restaurant, where Fetterman and the man she has been dating for 12 years, Ed Lomerson, dance. Herman's wife is vocalist in an 18-piece Big Band orchestra that performs there. "They are first on the dance floor and dancing rings around the world," he said.

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“What I saw in her was intellectual curiosity that you don’t see a lot anymore,” Herman said.

Fetterman recalls a similar interaction. “He said, ‘you have intellectual curiosity.’” She then quickly agreed to interviews that began last December.

“I thought, I have a positive story I’d like to share with the world,” Fetterman said.

For Herman, Fetterman’s story is the favorite of those he has written and published by 194 Rodney Press in Bloomfield, Connecticut, with a theme that may help improve the lives of others.

“She’s a very, very inspirational lady,” Herman said. “I really wanted to write her story.”

He promised it would be in print in time for her birthday in June.

“I really was a fan before, I’m a bigger fan now. I want everyone to know her.”

“I think he did a fantastic job of weaving different parts of my life,” Fetterman said.

The biography covers her early life, when she was just 7 and working at the hardware store opened by her parents in 1924, the only Jewish residents in Danielson. Fetterman became a bookkeeper and by 1937, at 10 years old, began working with customers. As the years went by, an aunt encouraged her to pursue a college degree, eventually attending the nearby University of Connecticut.

Fetterman’s husband, Irving, who died in 1983, helped her take care her younger brother, and accommodated her studies, traveling from Danielson to UConn seven days a week. “A wonderful, wonderful husband,” she said.

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Fetterman pursued a varied career. In addition to teaching home economics, she oversaw “Speaking for the Consumer,” a television program giving consumer advice that was broadcast on WTNH Channel 8 in New Haven. and became an educator at both UConn and the University of Massachusetts, bringing an expertise in writing grants, such as one that helped mothers on welfare become self supportive.

Rich with anecdotes

Anecdotes fill each of the 41 chapters, from the time she helped collect \$300,000 to buy shares in Knox Glass so the manufacturing company would come to town, and the year her daughter, Vita, spent in a children’s hospital to deal with a malignant hemangioma diagnosis.

The book also conveys how determined Fetterman has been to get a wider audience for the story of the Temple Beth Israel, built in the 1950s by the Jewish residents of Danielson, including about 50 Holocaust survivors who settled in town and got support from the community.

Fetterman pursued a Daughters of the American Revolution grant for \$9,200 to produce the documentary “A House Built by Hope: A Story of Compassion, Resilience and Religious Freedom” and also received a second grant to undertake repairs to the temple building. Now, \$4 from each sale of the biography will go toward the continued efforts to preserve the temple.

Fetterman has three grown children, daughter Judy Engel in East Lyme, Connecticut, son David Fetterman in Hadley, after 40 years teaching at Stanford, and daughter Vita Goldstein in Israel, who designed the book’s cover. She has seven grandchildren and four great grandchildren,

Her mantra is positivity. “Now I choose to not associate with people who are negative,” Fetterman said.

Roy Fetterman, at the time a real estate agent in Amherst, died in a motorcycle crash in Amherst in 1986. “What’s done is done, I can’t do anything about it, I can’t bring him back to life,” Fetterman said. “We all have negative things happen in our life.”

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Living in a college town, Fetterman said she loves having young people around. Her home is divided so that a doctoral student from Ghana can live in one part that is accessible should she be disabled. Two more students will be moving into other parts of the home later in the summer. “I feel like I have such quality of life,” Fetterman said.

Fetterman said she has no intent of slowing down, continuing to dine with Lomerson at The Boathouse at Brunelle’s Marina in South Hadley and boarding The Lady Bea for river cruises, going to Pilates classes every Wednesday, lifting dumbbells and working out with a personal trainer. She also recently renewed her driver’s license for another five years, and plays Mahjong every Monday, and teaches the game at the Jewish Community of Amherst.

“My attitude is look at all the positive things we have in our life,” Fetterman said.

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