



Elizabeth Eichelbaum

I'm getting ready for a party. It's small, just sixteen for dinner, mostly family. I rub, I scrub, I do everything. I don't wait around.

Elizabeth Eichelbaum, at age ninety the oldest person in the world to earn a Ph.D., has never waited around. The pace of her life is nonstop. She is an inspiration to everyone who knows her, and her story is one of determination, talent, and hard work.

Elizabeth and her sisters didn't arrive in America until she was eleven. Trapped in Russia during World War I after their mother emigrated, they ended up in an orphanage in Kiev. "It was an abandoned palace, but there was no food. When we got any food from the outside we tried to share it, because children all around us were so hungry they were crying." After the war, an American reporter came to the orphanage and wrote a story about the girls, including their

names. Through the story, their mother found them and sent for them to join her in New York. Elizabeth started school there, but had to stop after eighth grade to go to work. "My mother thought, like everybody then, girls just learn to read and write and then they get married. I always knew that someday I would go back to school. I wanted to learn, and for years I felt embarrassed because I didn't have an education."

But the education had to wait. Elizabeth and her husband bought and ran an all-night kosher-style delicatessen, The Bagel, in Detroit. "We had a choice: to buy a bakery or a restaurant. My husband was a baker, but I said a restaurant is better. You meet people and you don't stay up all night with flour in your lungs. So we bought the restaurant." In Detroit they raised four sons, including twins who became artists. Elizabeth herself loved to draw and paint. She took some courses and discovered that the twins didn't have all the family talent for art. Still, her desire for a formal education was strong.

"When I was sixty-five I told my sons, I'm going to register for high school. They said, 'Ma, you don't need to register, just take the test.' So I took a test, and I did so well they said, 'You should go to college.' I got an associate degree with a 4.0 average, and then I got a bachelor of fine arts from Wayne State when I was sixty-nine.

At eighty-one I completed the master of education and a degree in art therapy, both at Wayne State. Soon after, I received a specialist in education degree."

Then, in May 2000, Elizabeth received her Ph.D. from the University of Tennessee. Her thesis focused on art therapy and self-esteem in older adults. For many people, achieving a doctorate at an advanced age would be the culmination of a lifetime. They might consider sitting down for a while. But for Elizabeth, who was interviewed on *Good Morning America* and profiled in the *New York Times*, the degree was just one more milestone on an open road. She still has work to do. She gives talks and encourages activity for older people. She continues her work as an art therapist in retirement communities. She understands how to introduce the elderly to the therapeutic experience of art.

"My job is to make them know they are alive. They give up for various reasons—friends and relatives die, their health is not great, they just lose themselves. My job is to wake them up. I start with whatever they can do."

Elizabeth has encouraged many "hopeless" patients to become active. "I say to them, 'How do you know you don't know anything if you have never tried?' When they say, 'My hands hurt,' I say, 'You work with your hands, you forget your

pain. Then your mind works more and your hands hurt less.' And they do it."

Seeing Elizabeth arrive with art supplies must be a wake-up call in itself. A lovely and youthful-looking woman with boundless energy, Elizabeth is not deterred by the loss of sight from macular degeneration that has reduced her vision so that driving is impossible, reading is almost gone, and many tasks are difficult. "It's frustrating but there's nothing I can do about it. I have helpers that read to me and help me when I need it. I am still independent."

How does a painter cope with fading eyesight? "I've been painting a lot lately, and it looks different. People tell me it's freer. I give a lot away now. Many great painters lost some sight at the end of their lives. A lot of artists can't break loose, but when you can't see so good you loosen up. When I'm painting there are no dull moments."

According to family lore, Elizabeth has always been guided by her own credo, the very one she repeated to her sons whenever they complained that something was too hard, or that something was beyond them. Their mother always said, "Don't ever tell me you can't do anything. You may not do it as good as others and you may do it better. But don't tell me you can't do it."

