

**Sophie:** Helen welcomed Annie and I into her home, and we sat down around her dining table where we conducted this interview. She lives here at Wartburg with her husband Rob. We asked Helen ahead of time to pick an object that had special sentimental value, or that she associated with a certain memory, so when we arrived she had already retrieved a photobook from her living room to show us. The front cover displays a large photo of the home where she lived for nearly sixty years before moving to Wartburg. On each page is a picture of a different room in the home. As we flip through the book together, Helen begins to tell us about her life and the time she spent living in this home.

**Helen:** So it was kind of hectic, when I look back on it, hectic time ya know. Rob was going to war on ships, I was having babies, *\*laughter\** everything was going like that.

**Annie:** Helen and Rob had lived for a while in a naval housing community in Norfolk, Virginia where they had their daughter Maureen.

**H:** Nice, nice enough, but I was, ya know I'd left my friends and family really ya know, in, up in Brooklyn. And uh, at times, and then Rob would go out to sea, and so I wouldn't, I really wouldn't recommend it to anybody. Ya know, we got through it, and uh ya know, been 60 years married, oh no, 58 married, and uh, but it's, it wasn't the way it was in story books. Ya know *\*chuckle\** so a lot of it was, when I think back, I'm glad I was only 21, 22, 23 ya know and uh, only because I don't think I could do it now ya know. We would just pack up and go, or you stay and say *\*imitates sorrowful sniffle\** "goodbye I'll see ya I don't know when, where" ya know. Uh, but it worked you know, uh, our marriage is very, we're very solid. We wanted a large family, it wasn't like "woah, y' look what happening to us." We just, really that was what I anticipated my life being, but we had lived in a little house in North Babylon when we were first married, and we had a couple of children and that was that kind of, everybody's house was the same you know thing. Then when we uh decided that we could afford a better house and a bigger house and design it the way we wanted, we had them uh do this house. When you came in the foyer it was pretty large, and as they say it was open, so the staircase to go upstairs where the bedrooms were, it was the dining room and it was the entrance to the, what my children called, the green rug room. *\*quiet tapping of Helen's finger against the page in the book\**

**A:** We're looking at a room with olive green carpeting and a nice little wood table, which brings back a memory for Helen.

**H:** Now the green rug room was um, was a living room, uh but it was the same size, uh their playroom, if you wanna call it, playroom whatever, but it was the same size on the other side of the house, and they were allowed to go in there, and if you wanted to read a book and do a quiet thing you were perfectly, ya know, welcome. Do not bring all your toys in there *\*chuckling\** 'n leave em on the floor, that's not what that room is for. So we tried to with a large family, keep the living room more for adults, for company ya know, and uh Brendan was reminding me now, he was a funny little guy, and uh he, Sheila, our daughter Sheila, used to dress him up every Christmas in Santa Claus stuff and he would go under here and then he would put a tablecloth over here. Now uh it worked well when she did it in this room, and then when we get to the room with the fireplace, Brendan wouldn't do it, and Sheila's about four I guess, and she said why not and he said but Santa will get burned if we put a fire in the fireplace so.

**A:** She turns the page now to what had been the playroom. It's just outside of the kitchen and the two rooms are only separated by a booth with three tall chairs sitting at it.

**S:** Um, well one thought on this room, so when we were looking at the pictures it's fairly, like there's, ya know, this is a house that's, it doesn't look super lived in in the photos. It's very clean, ya know *\*Helen laughs\** you can see a couple book shelves, the couch and all, the clean blue rug, the clean walls, but when you were living in here what did this room look like?

**H:** It did not look like that, really, no. To be honest it did not look like that. It was always, ya I will say, it was always reasonably clean, and once in a while we got to, or I could have a cleaning woman and that was nice but uh, and as the children got older they were very helpful, but uh it was always cluttered, and they decided that when we were, it was time to move, cause we had a big full basement, big size and laughed, it was full, and they said "you and dad go," so they, so we have a picture of Brendan and Michaela drinking the last beer they found *\*laughter\** under a drawer in the, in the basement, but they totally cleaned it out. And we had had the basement painted you know, so it wasn't dirty, but it was just full of stuff, and uh, ya know I still, I'm better, but I'm not as good as I could be ya know. I like to hold onto my books, I like to hold on to my clothes that I like, I ya know, mementos, ya know. *\*laughter\**

**A:** The way your mom was with objects...

**H:** Well, my mother was an extremely neat, neat house keeper but we had very little space. We lived, as I said, in a nice apartment, I have my own bedroom, which was, had been a dining room, was turned into a bedroom, and my brother, I had one brother who was a year younger, and he had his own room too, and uh, what my mother was not a saver ya know. To the point where I, and she was a good mother, and I loved her dearly, but she saved nothing. There isn't a teddy bear, there isn't a doll, there isn't even a book, and I had zillions of books when I was little. She just would say "ya know we don't have room." Or I'd come home from school and she said "oh I just got the house all cleaned," and I'd say "where's my books," "well I thought you read them ya know" *\*chuckle\** "oh where's my dolls," "oh you're too big for the dolls," and it wasn't meanness on her part, it was that she worshiped at the shrine of cleanliness and neatness, and I didn't. Ya know I was more oh ya know *\*unintelligible\** it'll be alright. So uh it wasn't, it was never a um, uh, it wasn't make us angry at each other, it was more after uh, I grew up, and, and after she died, that I realized I didn't have anything, ya know. Now all of my children have something you know, and what would happen would be, would, the one child would have a book like, it was Christopher, I just picked one up yesterday, and he's printed all "Christopher Byrnes," and then Brendan crossed it out and wrote "Brendan," *\*laughter\** cus then when Brendan got a little older he found the book and he said foey for Chris, I'll keep the book.

If I had to describe my life, uh, there were, p- very, there painful things, but uh there also were a lot of joy. The biggest pain of course was, was that at different times, two of my children died. Uh, Robert uh, had a glioblastoma multiforme, which is the worst kind of brain cancer you can have, and it just popped up out of nowhere, and he survived with it maybe five, ten years ya know, so he was, Robert was I guess 20 something when he died, but we were sort of prepared for that because he never really got over being sick, it's just that ya know it wasn't threatening his life for a while, and uh, he it was um, ah it's uh, it's uh a very strong memory I have, because Robert was in the hospital at the time, in Sloan Kettering in New York City, and we were, and

they said ya know that he had sort of, uh ya know, changed, it was possible that he could die at any moment, and we were, we being his brothers and sisters and his dad and I,

*\*"Come to me, All Ye Who Labor" by the Monks of Prior quietly starts to play\**

uh ya know we're singing and talking to him and praying for him, and then finally one of my children said "mom, that's not the kind of music Robert likes, we brought his music," so I said "alright." So, but I was holding Robert's hand an' ya know telling him, oh uh what a wonderful son he had been and how much I loved him, and I let go of his hand when he took his last breath, and I said to my daughter Maureen, "I'm so happy we're here, I'm hoping Robert realizes we're here", she said "mom take a look," and this was, this was nothing I ever saw before, she said "look at Robert's arm." Now it must be the blood changes quickly in the body because my entire hand like this \*grabs arm\* was like this, you could see every one of my fingers on Robert's arm, and silly as it sounds, I was very comforted by that, I thought, he knew we were here, ya know, he knows what we were saying and doing, but they were right about the music, I mean Robert was a music bud.

Michaela was looking at the book, she said, "don't forget to tell them what you did with your dining room." *\*laughter\** Well, it was, we did not want him to be hospitalized if he didn't have to be and the only way we were could do it, we couldn't do it up and down the stairs, so we had folding doors put in, and we had uh, the closet taken out and Robert lived in the dining room maybe, I don't know, we had nurses coming in, and somewhere around a year, maybe less, and then, when he went back to the hospital we, put it back to being a dining room.

*\*song continues briefly and then fades out\**

**A:** Sheila's death was different. She struggled for a long time with seizures from a sickness earlier on, but was more or less leading a regular life, until, one morning, her roommate found that she had passed away in the night.

**H:** And that was a very hard thing for me to accept, ya know. I said it's silly but knowing that somehow we were getting the message through to Robert, he wasn't alone, didn't have an opportunity to do that with Sheila, and then Maureen, my oldest daughter, said to me one day, she said "mom, told me, some mother, somebody told me that something that helped me i'm gonna tell you. They said that nobody, this person believed, that nobody ever dies alone or has a sense of being totally alone." The ol' what we call that great sort of presence of God, that overwhelming presence fills in that space, and that, and I said "ya know, I'm gonna believe it," cause I think it could be, and it's a nicer way to think of it, so uh Sheila's death was the hard one though because she struggled so hard to have a normal life ya know, Robert was in and out of the hospital that was kind of different, where Sheila was back teaching, and she liked teaching and she was very happy, and the- uh, they gave her um, when she, after she died this, uh, the, the girl's teacher and the principal arranged a, a kind of a memorial, and all the little children were there, and it was very touching, because they had the children, they gave, they told stories about Sheila in the first place, and they were all nice ya know, but then one little boy was supposed to read uh uh, I don't know if this is appropriate, but there was, this was on the lecture, and he was supposed to get up and go up and read this prayer, well he couldn't reach it, so he did this once *\*gesturing to reaching up\** he did it twice *\*laughing\** so all of a sudden

somebody realized his dilemma and gave him the book open, but, so those are the funny memories, but uh those were the two, most painful experiences ever in my life.

**S:** Do you feel like letting go of this home was harder because of the fact that you had lost children who grew up in this home?

**H:** No, it made me not, no it, it, it would have, ya know, except that I thought ya know, it's just a house. No I, I guess what I'm finding hard is one the loss of independence, I really can't go anywhere by myself ya know, because they're afraid I'll *\*pfft\** drop over, and uh, that's uh hard because I, I have a license, my car is out there, but I haven't driven it in almost a year now, and I don't know if I ever will, I think I'm go' give it to Brendan, but um, other than that I miss the people ya know. I- I miss the socialization with people that ar', were my good friends for many years and uh, I don't miss the house ya know.

**S:** Yeah.

**H:** I don't know why you know, I, just cause Rob said he misses it a little bit, I said "well I miss it, I'd like to drive by and see ya know, say hello to the neighbors, but I don't really miss living in the house," and uh, I think by the time we were moving out, it was time to move ya know, and this, the nicest thing when we were moving in here, which we were excited about, they said "nope, we're emptying out the old house, and then you can come. The day after we get in we'll get chairs and settle in, so we came here, they had taken out some christmas decorations, but not a lot, they had a nativity

*\*"Silent Night" sung by the Vancouver Youth Choir begins playing\**

and I am not a sewer, but I'm a really good knitter, and I had made Christmas stockings for every child, every grandchild, every body, and they put, left them all in the box, except for Sheila and Robert's, and when I walked in that was what was on my fireplace, which was very touching for me cause they were saying, "they're here too," y'know, at least that's the way I saw it, ya know. "We don't forget," and they don't, but when I walked in I looked I thought, oh my God, I started to cry I said "that's Sheila and Robert's stockings..."

You can't buy community, ok. So you can, you can look at a house and think it's beautiful, you can look at the background and so, but you just can't buy community and this has come with the most caring, accepting community that I've ever been in. They just, like you, they wanna help you in any way they can, and that helps you feel to at home there and uh, and I kinda would like, I'd like to get some of my life back ya know, more independence, say "oh hi ya, see ya later Michaela or Rob, I'm gonna just ride down to the mall I wanna pick up something, or I just wanna take a ride," I can't do that. Now, that is not the worst thing in the world, and I'm trying to be extremely gracious about it, *\*laughter\** but, it and Michaela will come after she sees that I'm going to the edge *\*laughter\** so she'll say "you wanna go, well go to the store," and I'm, ya know I had a birthday in march, I've turned 90, I couldn't believe the numbers but I did, and O thought, ya know how many years, maybe I'll make, break records, but I doubt it, and I thought, I don't worry so much because I've seen a lot of them here working together as adults helping us to adjust to our new life, and uh, they really care for one another, and I thought when I'm gone, and Robs gone, it won't be like the family is gone.

**S:** One of the through lines throughout our conversation was the importance of family and community in Helen's life. Despite the book being focused on the home itself, the emotional value it holds for Helen seems to be focused primarily on the time she spent there with her family and friends.

**H:** So uh, that's kind of uh, something I-I've thought about, that ya know cause first I, I'm not afraid of dying, I-I'm not ready, ya know, but I'm not afraid of it, but I thought, ya know, gee if Rob and I die, we're both the same age, then well there goes the family, and that's not how it's gonna be because I see how deep the roots are.