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# Transcendental Meditation and Ice Cream: A Conversation With a 94-Year-Old Hippie

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Photo by Dara Craul

## SHE PARTIED WITH MEL BROOKS, JOINED THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY AND GAVE THE MAHARISHI A GLASS OF WATER

*Words by Avery Gregurich*

We are sitting at the kitchen table in her house, and the Queen of Fairfield is holding my hand. Sunlight filters in through the window behind her, spotlighting a string of ancient Christmas lights hanging from the wall and a series of paintings: framed fallen leaves, various birds and landscape scenes.

The Queen, Lillian Darr, is 94 years old. **Her book**, “Memoirs of a 90-Year-Old Hippie,” sits between us.

It’s the mayor who’s given her the title of Queen of Fairfield, Iowa. At various points in the day, she holds other titles: cook, tour guide, historian, jester. I ask her how old she feels inside. She says, “Depends on the day. Maybe in my 80s. Today, I feel good because you’re here.”

She’s just told me about her weekly poker games, held Friday nights at this very table for the last several years. She tells me it’s “serious poker” with a \$5 buy-in, and she’s the only woman playing.

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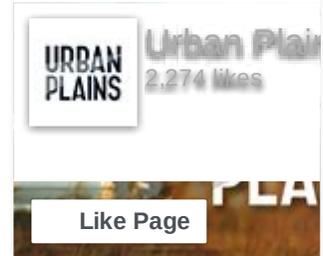


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Before telling a story, nearly every story, Lillian says, “It’s all in the book.” And she’s right: After a few hours together, it becomes clear that the book and the woman cannot be separated. The pages are a collage of colorful vignettes and photographs, written and collected over the last several decades. They’re broken up largely by husband (there have been three) or decade. She shows me the original “manuscript,” or rather, a stack of junk mail in a manila envelope on the backs of which Lillian wrote the basis of her autobiography. And our conversation mirrors the fluidity of that tone, moving through time and subject without much warning.



A collection of Darr’s most treasured and unique items, including a pair of Sorcerer Mickey Mouse flags, sits on display. Photo by Avery Gregurich.

Here then, too, is a sort of pastiche of one woman’s life, gathered from a day spent in her home and from the pages of her book. It’s incomplete, even as her own memoir is incomplete. But as she reminds me several times, “Everybody’s got a story to tell.”

Some of her stories are near mythic.

She had been married just 10 days to her first husband, Bob Busch, before he was sent back to the

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Pacific theater of World War II. When he returned, he got involved in the TV and film industry in New York and later Hollywood, allowing Lillian to rub shoulders with some of stage and screen's most notable icons.

Some examples include:

- Seeing a drunken **Sid Caesar** feign copulation with a turkey carcass at a party.
- Watching **Mel Brooks** try out his Jewish cowboy act and a Superman impression at another party.
- Riding through Los Angeles with **Harry Belafonte** before his show at the Greek Theatre.
- Throwing a fundraiser for the United Nations Association at the home of **Steve Allen** and **Jayne Meadows**.
- Asking a young man at a party, "Lenny, what do you do?" (It was **Leonard Bernstein**. He said, "I'm in music.")
- Discussing her family's cheesecake with **Julia Child**, of which there's a photograph in her book. She says **Wolfgang Puck** was in attendance as well.

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Some stories are political. In the '70s, after her divorce from Busch, she moved to Berkeley, California, and became involved in much of the counterculture's activities.

 Urban Plains – 2 Black Panther  SOUNDCLOUD

At various points, Darr was also involved in the Women for Legislative Action, the American Civil Liberties Union, the United Nations Association, and the American Association for the United Nations. In 1967, she **marched the streets of San Francisco to Kezar Stadium** with over 60,000 other demonstrators in protest of the Vietnam War. She was arrested for stealing bed sheets from a department store in attempt

to “deplete the resources of the ‘fat cats’ who supported the war.”

For these “subversive” activities and her involvement in these organizations over several decades, her name has appeared on the blacklists of Sen. Joseph McCarthy, President Richard Nixon, and even the FBI.

Now, she’s a Bernie Sanders fanatic. They’re both from Brooklyn. She says she “sent him her \$27.” There’s a “Sanders 2016” poster in the front window, and the results from the Wisconsin primaries hum from the television throughout the morning. She got to see him speak in Fairfield this past fall, but Lillian might best be remembered for a photograph of her following the speech of the last Democratic presidential nominee to speak in Fairfield.

 Urban Plains – 3 Obama  SOUND CLOUD

I ask her if she keeps an open mind in politics.

“It’s not terribly open when it comes to Republicans!”

And some stories are incredibly mystic, many incredibly human.

 Urban Plains – 4 Bill  SOUND CLOUD

Her third husband, Bill Darr, was an artist and writer who trained under Millard Sheets, a famous painter and architect from the California School of Painting. Bill was an original member of the first Board of Trustees at the world-renowned Studio Arts Center International in Florence, Italy. They were together for 17 years until Bill’s death. His paintings and etchings fill the walls of Lillian’s home.



A collection of prints, paintings, and photographs hang above Darr's kitchen table. Photo by Avery Gregurich.

During her time in Berkeley, she became known as the mother of the **Berkeley Transcendental Meditation Center**. She's practiced Transcendental Meditation (TM) for the last 40-plus years. Along with the proximity to her family, this is the reason for her residence here in Fairfield, home of Maharishi University of Management, the world's largest training center for TM. She herself has taught the technique all over, including once to the prisoners of San Quentin Prison.

On several occasions, she even met and conversed with the **Maharishi Mahesh Yogi**, the founder of the TM movement and perhaps most famous for his time as the guru for the Beatles, the Beach Boys and many others.

There is a small mantel in Lillian's home with many remembrances and illustrations of the man.



A photograph of Transcendental Meditation pioneer Maharishi Mahesh Yogi greets guests as they walk into Darr's home. Photo by Avery Gregurich.

Lillian published her first story in the anthology “Chicken Soup for the Woman’s Soul” many years ago. One day, she received a letter from a reader also named Lillian Darr in Arkansas. She’d enjoyed the story and was struck by the coincidence of their shared name. The two met and visited one another a few times while Lillian and Bill were traveling through the South. The Arkansas Lillian Darr lived to be 107 years old.

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“I just came from the doctor and I got a good passing grade.”

Lillian eats well and exercises regularly. She does Tai Chi Chih and there’s a mini-trampoline propped up in the living room that she uses weekly.

It’s after lunch with family and friends, and she’s heading to the refrigerator for her “only vice.” She returns with a dish of ice cream for me: a scoop each of Breyers Rocky Road and Edy’s French Silk. Then, she heads to the cabinet and gathers a few pills to take with her own ice cream.

“I eat the ice cream as a reward for taking my supplements,” she says.

“You mean to counteract the ice cream?” a friend asks.

The Queen laughs richly, smiles, and picks up her spoon.

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