As a BSN student, I enrolled in a gerontological nursing practicum in which part of the clinical experience included participating in the Friendly Visitor Program. Each student was paired up with an older adult in the community to visit and provide a source of companionship. Part of the class assignment was to journal on our experience, including what we did together and our thoughts and feelings about each weekly visit. This Endnote includes excerpts from my journal. I chose to pair with a woman named Marie, because of our similar farming background and because Marie was a centenarian, having lived for 100 years. The experience taught me that we, as care providers, have an opportunity to learn lessons from older adults only if we take the time to listen.

I was excited and a little nervous to meet Marie as her Friendly Visitor. I have spent most of my recent life working with older adults as a CNA and I am comfortable interacting with them. But I have never “just” sat and visited with no other purpose than simply enjoying one another’s company.

I peeked into the dining room and found Marie sitting at the table. Just seeing her profile, I understood that this woman had aged gracefully and even vivaciously. She was a woman who knew how to sit in silence and feel at peace. I was pleasantly surprised to find Marie, a frail, small woman, sitting contented in her family’s huge farmhouse amidst family and friends who prized and cared for her as the strong, beautiful woman she is. She had accepted and even embraced the life she was granted.

I bent to her level and introduced myself. I felt a little embarrassed to say I was here to visit with her. But what I really meant was that I was there to listen and learn from her. What were my stories compared to hers—80 years fewer of them for sure!

Although only an hour passed during our first visit, I was reminded of what such women of wisdom can teach us. Marie helped raise her 13 younger siblings after her mother died in her mid 40s of a cancer—not Marie Farrell

To The Editor:

I read with considerable interest the Endnotes by Laura Ankeny in the March 2007 issue of the Journal of Gerontological Nursing (Vol. 33, No. 3, pp. 54-56). This sort of experience would be a good one for any nursing student.

Ms. Ankeny did make one statement that showed her youth and obvious lack of U.S. history. She commented that her subject, Marie Farrell, “told me about her childhood and how she was not given a social security number at birth. Only boys were given one” (p. 55).

Since Mrs. Farrell was probably born in 1906 or thereabouts, she could never have been given a social security number at birth, as President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the Social Security law in 1935. The giving of a number at birth is a really recent addition, and came about because of the IRS requirement that dependents’ social security numbers be listed on tax forms. For many years, children did not have to have their numbers listed, and later only children older than 2—the “enumeration at birth” program actually went into effect in 1998, although many children had numbers at birth well before that.

And there was never a time when only boys got the numbers.

Kathryn Reeves, RN, MA, CHPN, CRNH
Mountain Center, California

Response:

I am writing in regard to your response to my Endnotes article “Lessons Learned from the Lived” about Marie mentioning only boys were given social security numbers at birth at the time of her birth. Yes, I know neither boys nor girls were given social security numbers in the early 1900s (I earned an A+ in both my high school and college U.S. history courses). I mentioned Marie’s comment to illustrate the discrimination she both experienced and perceived as a female during the early 20th century.

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