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Suzanne Tate's secrets to a long, happy life - Author, 90, who has battled cancer and heartbreak, on how she's made it this far - Inner Banks

By Maggie Miles August 14, 2020 Publication: Virginian-Pilot, The (Norfolk, VA) Page: 28E Word Count: 1042

Suzanne Tate is well known as a successful writer of children's books on marine life. But she is also a survivor - a woman who has seen much adversity in her life, from family tragedy, to freak accidents, to multiple sudden health crises. Throughout it all, she never lost her gumption, her fortitude, or her zest for life.

Now, healthy and thriving at 90, Tate is reflecting on her life and the things that got her to this point - and seems as surprised as anyone that she's made it this far.

"I can't believe that I have lived to my 90th birthday. Chiefly because I had breast cancer over 40 years ago. When that happened I decided I won't live to be 50, and then when I lived to be 50 I thought well, I won't live to my 70th, and then I survived that and then along came the turn of the century, and then here we are 20 years later!" says Tate.

Breast cancer isn't the only thing Tate has endured. She has survived breaking her neck in a terrible car accident at 22, a double mastectomy and six reconstruction surgeries in her 40s, triple bypass surgery in her 60s, getting hit by a taxi cab in her 70s, and four years ago, a heart attack at church on Easter Sunday.

She has also suffered much heartbreak, like the loss of her youngest son at 19 to a car accident, and surviving two husbands, the second who she fell in love with in her 80s.

So, how does one survive all these things and come out living a healthy and active life into their 90s? In the book "The Blue Zones," National Geographic Fellow, journalist and producer Dan Buettner traveled the world to study the best strategies for how to live a long, healthy, happy life from the people of the Blue Zones. These are the places in the world where the highest percentage of people live into their 100s and remain active and well into their 80s, 90s and beyond. From looking at what these people eat and drink, to exercise, habits and lifestyle, he discovered the secrets of a long life, and it just so happens Tate exemplifies most of them.

The first is to move naturally. Tate has always lived an active lifestyle, growing up as a tomboy on a farm, riding horses. She also joined the U.S. Navy at 22, without telling her parents because she knew they wouldn't approve, she says. Now her favorite form of exercise is dance.

"Fast dancing!" she says. Since she can't go to live shows anymore, Tate dances every day in her house. She loves keeping up on the news, saying it's like food to her, so instead of dancing to music, she dances to the news, she says.

Having a purpose is another secret. The Okinawans call it "ikigai" and the Nicoyans of Costa

Rica call it "plan de vida." For Tate, who finished the last of 40 books in her "Nature Series" at the ripe age of 89, says writing got her through some of her darkest days.

"It certainly has helped me to think of other things besides what is really impacting my life in an adverse way," she says.

Some of the other secrets of the Blue Zones are being part of a faith-based community, putting loved ones first and having lifelong friendships - all things that are incredibly important to Tate. She was a member of Duck United Methodist Church for 52 years, but now attends Mount Olivet United Methodist Church. Tate credits Mount Olive parishioners for bringing her food every day after her heart attack.

She also has an extremely tight-knit family, going to her son's house to eat dinner with his family every night, and currently building a home right next to theirs to be even closer. Lifelong friendships are also Tate's stronghold.

"Friendships are so important," she says. "I have wonderful friends. I have one friend who calls me every day to see how I am. And I have a friend from school days, at least a 70-year friendship. She's in Ohio and we talk often. And I have a friend here who's over a 50 years friendship."

Eating healthy is also important to Tate. She says after her heart surgery, she adopted a predominantly plant-based diet - another commonality she shares with people in the Blue Zones. Tate eats mostly low-carb and very little meat, she says. Before the surgery she ate cookies and cakes.

"So, I just really, really changed my diet. Before the surgery I would eat sausage and that kind of thing - and I just don't do that anymore. It wasn't hard to change because I knew how much better I felt," Tate says.

Tate wants young people to learn from her health crises. She didn't have any symptoms when she had her heart issues, she says, which is not uncommon among women who die of heart attacks. She also survived cancer for over 40 years because they caught it early, so she emphasizes the importance of regular breast exams. Skin cancer is another trial she has overcome; young people should be diligent about protecting their skin from the sun, she says.

"My grandma has always made me feel so proud to be her grandson," says Scott Tate, 35, who was the inspiration behind Tate's children's books. "She has had such an amazing life."

Scott says he often turns to his grandmother for advice; she seems to know everything about everything, he says, and he sees her as a role model.

"She has made it to 90 because she never stops. She's like the energizer bunny," he says. "There is no off switch. She's always doing something, somewhere, with someone all the time."

But, Tate's biggest advice for a long, happy life?

"One: Follow your interests in life. It is more rewarding to you than anything else. Two: Always think of other people more than yourself - I've always done that. Three: To not give up when adversity enters your life. I would say that I did that - that I haven't given up when these things

happen."

That and ice cream.

"Lots of ice cream," she says.

Over the years, Suzanne Tate, 90, has taught the community many lessons through her quirky marine life characters in her "Nature Series" children's books. But perhaps the most valuable lesson of all, is the lesson to be learned from the life of Tate herself. Maggie Miles/Freelance

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