A True Survivor

Carolyn Carter, a 22-year resident at Stone Oak's premiere retirement and assisted living communities, looks back at 10 decades of living.

By Jennifer Chappell Smith

Surrounded by counted cross-stitch samplers and needlepoint pillows, Carolyn Carter has lived in this comfortable suite at Independence Hill Assisted Living since last June. But she’s one of the longest tenured residents to ever reside at this acclaimed network of neighboring facilities for retirement living.

She and her third husband, Tiller, moved to a cottage home at Independence Hill Retirement Resort Community back in 1994, and she’s always enjoyed the community’s amenities. “We did everything they offered,” she says, remembering shuttle-bus excursions, social activities, and shopping trips. “It turned out to be the perfect move for us.” Carolyn later moved to an inside apartment at Independence Hill before relocating to the Assisted Living community, needing a little extra care as she approached her 100th birthday on September 20th. “I love how open and airy the Assisted Living common areas feel, with atriums and spacious hallways,” Carolyn says.

She attributes her endurance through a long life filled with love and inevitable losses to her strong Christian faith. “I couldn’t have done it without my belief,” she says. Carolyn has lost three husbands, her only daughter, friends, and card-playing companions. Though dimming eyesight keeps her from reading and needlework, she finds joy every day as she listens to books on tape and reminisces over a scrapbook made on her 90th birthday. She even strolls to the facility’s common area to have a go at the waist-high shuffle-board table, knocking a weighted, metal disc across a slippery surface. “That’s 1 point,” she says as the game piece comes to a stop.

More than one love story

Carolyn first spied her future husband, Tiller, when she was 8 years old and saw a tow-headed 13-year-old farmhand on her grandmother’s Texas farm. “He was out there working for the summer,” she says. Tiller grew up in Luling and she, in Lockhart, so their paths crossed, and they even briefly dated. “But we drifted apart,” Carolyn remembers. It took the couple decades to reunite after both found themselves widowed.

Carolyn’s first husband, Royce St. John, moved with her to San Antonio, where they raised their daughter, Mary Nell. He died after 19 years of marriage. She married her second husband, John Turner, gaining a step-daughter, and the couple enjoyed eight years of marriage until he died. “That’s when Tiller came back into the picture,” she says. “One afternoon there was a knock at the door, and there he was.”

After Tiller retired, the couple took road trips across the U.S., traveled to Europe, Alaska, and Hawaii, and enjoyed the houseboat community on Austin's Lake Travis. They lived in a retirement community near the lake until discovering Independence Hill in San Antonio, where they moved to be near Carolyn’s daughter and Tiller’s son and daughter. Tiller died in 2001, but they enjoyed 32 years together. “We had a good time,” Carolyn says.