

Math is fun.

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Memorial Park is home for a

By Kristen Day
Features Editor

It isn't often that you find an amazing piece of history in your own backyard, especially here at Biola.

Imagine how much more you'd appreciate your own life and experiences if only you took the time to get to know the stories behind the people living near you.

Here's one story. Learn about life through her eyes, and you might find that the eyes of a 75-year-old are as clear and youthful as your own.

Harriette Peebler is as close to death as she can get. Living in a cemetery, she's surrounded by it.

But that doesn't get her down. She is just as bright and cheerful as the floral arrangements adorning the graves that cover her lawns.

Harriette and her husband, Gerald, own and operate Olive Lawn Memorial Park in La Mirada. Their gleaming white house stands in the middle of the cemetery. The front room of the house doubles as the business office.

Many people assume that the white, church-like building is a mortuary until they hear the story behind the tall, sloping roof of Harriette's house.

"I had always lived in a two-story house with an attic," Harriet explained. "So when we moved here, I had the room added to the flat buildings, and now I use the second story for storage. I call it my 80-foot bowling alley."

It's Saturday. In the kitchen below the "bowling alley," Harriet is skillfully preparing a batch of Amish Friendship Bread, chatting happily as she blends the dough. Her sunlit kitchen window reveals lawns and headstones in the distance.



WIL WINTER · PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR

Harriette and Gerald Peebler

believes that drinking milk keeps her looking young. Tapping her strong fingernails on her perfect ivory teeth, she says, "That's why I've still got these."

Growing up on a dairy farm did have its benefits.

Harriette graduated from high school in 1939, but did not immediately go on to college. There was

Peebler, told her that if she wouldn't marry him, he would go to Alaska, and she'd never see him again. "Obviously, I didn't say, 'Well go then,'" she remembered with a wry smile.

Gerald and Harriette were married on March 22, 1941. Soon after their honeymoon, Gerald was sent to Europe. World War II had begun.

Harriette and Gerald settled in Santa Ana and took over another shop in the laundry and dry cleaning chain, which eventually grew to include three shops. The Peeblers soon became parents to Chris, Jan and Scott.

Back in her kitchen with spatula in hand, Harriette recalls how she wanted to make sure she instilled a sense of responsibility in her children, who were required to work at the laundry business after school.

"You've got to move," she explained, shaking the spatula. She remembered how her father's successful dairy was a product of his family's long, hard hours of work.

Harriette is reminded of her son Chris, who was killed in Vietnam in 1969.

She points to a large, handsome portrait of Chris hanging in her living room. As she talks, her voice cracks and she can't hold back a few tears.

Leaving the kitchen, Harriette pulls out a picture album and points to a photograph of Chris, waving out of a bus window. "That's the last time we saw him," she says, drying her eyes.

Harriette calmly returns to her bread batter. It's finally mixed. She pours it into the bread pans and pushes the pans into the hot oven. The timer ticks quietly. She laughs.

"It's a lot of work to make this bread, but geewilikers, at least I have something to give away!"

Throughout her life, Harriette has given away more than just bread. She and Gerald have given of themselves to the people who come into their lives.

Harriette motions to Janis, a current employee, who is busily cleaning the office and living room.

"She's going to get her a house," Harriette said. "And she'll get it too. She's got a master plan for her life, and that's what it takes."

"Harriette's my foster mother," Janis joked. "I was an only child."

Dressed in blue slacks that are grandmotherly versions of Levi's and a practical white knit shirt, Harriette, age 75, looks trendy, yet dignified. She is in constant motion. Bowls of rising dough, utensils and empty bread pans are piled around her. She is carefully quartering a lemon in her hands.

"I bet you're wondering why I'm putting the rind in," she asked as she dropped pieces of lemon into the blender. "The rind is the zest."

Harriette thrives on the zest in her life.

She was born in 1921 in Riverside, California, but grew up on a dairy farm in the Coachella Valley. She still has a few old milk-caps with her father's Jesse Payne label on them.

"My grandkids tell me, 'Oh, that's a pog, grandma.'"

Harriette calmly tells them that she's capped hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of milk bottles by hand with "pogs."

As a girl, Harriette helped to feed her father and three brothers, plus any hired hands or extended family who might have been hungry too. On average, there was usually nine or ten people gathered around the table.

"I grew up working," she said. "Working is a way of life."

Health was also a way of life for Harriette, and still is. "There's nothing like things that are natural," she said.

Harriette relies on many herbs and vitamins for her health, and



COURTESY OF GERALD PEEBLER

The Peeblers , Scott Peebler (left), grandchildren and Biola student Doye Semin in 1980.

only so much money in her family, so her brothers were sent to college instead.

When she was 19 years old, Harriette's boyfriend, Gerald

During the time that her husband was fighting overseas, Harriette worked at Gerald's parents' laundry and dry cleaning store in Indio. In 1946, after the war was over,

Janis is from a family of 11. Harriette corrected her. "That'll tell you how much of an orphan she is."

Whether they are orphans or not, Harriette and her husband have

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lively body

always been involved in helping young people reach their potential. It's almost like they take the sadness and pain associated with the cemetery, convert it into energy and positive encouragement and pour it into the lives of the nearest ones needing it.

Harriette has been involved with the Optimist club for the past several years, organizing and attending fund-raisers for children's homes. This Christmas, she will be decorating a Christmas tree to be raffled at the Optimist's Christmas dinner.

Of course, Harriette's energy and enthusiasm can't be stopped from overflowing into lives of Biola students, either.

Since 1980, Harriette has employed men from Biola as grounds keepers at the cemetery during the school year and over the summer.

She feeds them meals and treats them like her own sons. "I always keep my cookie jar full for them," she laughed.

Kirk Scott, a sophomore at Biola, began working for the Peeblers this semester.

"Every time you see her, she has a million questions to ask," he said. "She really tries to get to know you. I enjoy talking to her."

Harriette and her husband have been pillars of the La Mirada community through their work at Olive Lawn since they arrived in the mid-seventies.

Reflecting on their work in the cemetery, Harriette believed that she and Gerald contributed not only their services but also a sincere understanding and sympathy to others who have lost loved ones.

"We brought a tremendous gift to the community," she said. "Going through death helps you to know what they're going through. I've always had empathy and sympathy for people—that's just who I am. I got that from my parents, and you pass on what you know."

"A lot sure can happen in 75 years," she finished.

Suddenly, Gerald rushes through the kitchen on his way to the front office. Without skipping a beat, he teases, "I thought it was 85, honey..."

"No," Harriette responded dryly. "I'm not quite there yet."

Gerald just grins and shuts the door behind him.

The timer in the kitchen hasn't stopped ticking, but the sweet smell of the bread filling the house lets Harriette know that her bread is done.

Using potholders, Harriette drags the steaming loaves out of the oven and puts them on the counter to cool. This batch is done. But is Harriette?

"You gotta keep busy," she said. "That's the name of the game. You gotta have a goal."

Harriette Peebler's goal is to keep working. Her son, Scott, lives in a separate house at the cemetery, and will take over when the Peeblers are ready to retire. But that won't be for a while.

"We always work as long as we have breath," Harriette promised. "It's a way of life."

Besides, there's always one more batch of Amish Friendship Bread to be made. And meanwhile, Harriette's life will continue to glow brighter than any shadow of death, no matter how close it may be.