Cornerstone Hospice Recognizes Oldest Patient: Lake County Centenarian Who Dedicated Life to Agriculture Industry

Mount Dora, Fla. – If you ask Mount Dora resident Olaf Larson about the state of the agriculture industry, he’d tell you that it’s changed dramatically over the last century. Larson would know because he has dedicated most of his 107 years to agriculture -- as a farmer, agricultural journalist, rural sociology researcher, and as a professor of Rural Sociology at Cornell University.

Larson is currently the oldest patient at Cornerstone Hospice and Palliative Care. His care team is amazed by the stories about his contribution to the farming industry and research related to the sociology of agriculture, which includes authoring several books and published papers.

“Mr. Larson’s recollection of dates, past career assignments and people he came across is mind-boggling,” said Selly Castillo, MSW, Cornerstone Hospice social worker. “During my visits, I am reminded of his unique perspective on the important history of farming and its role in our society today.”

Larson, who grew up on his parents’ southern Wisconsin farm, dual majored in agricultural journalism and soil science at the University of Wisconsin - Madison. When he graduated in 1932, the country was struggling to recover from the Great Depression; but he already had a job. One of his professors had arranged for the young Larson to be editor of a poultry publication.

“It was kind of funny because I don’t like chickens,” said Larson, who simultaneously went on to pursue a Masters in Journalism.

A couple of years later, Larson was tapped by another former professor to assist with research on the role of agriculture during the Depression. He would be recruited many times after that to assist with and ultimately lead research programs related to the sociology of agriculture.

The federal government tapped into his farming expertise by hiring him to lead projects involving low income farmers and rural poverty.

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When the U.S. entered World War II, Larson and his wife agreed that he should enlist but a tragic accident that killed his father left no one to manage the family farm.

“I spoke with my Navy recruiter who said I should go back to the farm,” said Larson. “I was still doing part time research for the Department of Agriculture.”

Larson sold the farm a few years later and he and his family moved to Portland, Oregon for another research position before being asked to join the faculty of Cornell University where he remained until retiring to Florida in 1999.

Larson says he is dismayed by the decline in family-operated farms and increase in massive produce and cattle operations; but he is heartened by the growing consumer demand for organically grown products.

“Those are almost always smaller farms. When I was growing up, farmers did not use commercial fertilizers, herbicides or pesticides,” said Larson.

Aside from food production, Larson believes that agriculture – especially family farms – is important to our country.

“In general, people who work on farms have values that are important. Values such as hard work and independence,” said Larson.

When he turned 100 seven years ago, Larson wrote a book for his two sons and grandchildren that helps illustrate what it was like to grow up on a family farm. His autobiography, When Horses Pulled the Plow: Life of a Wisconsin Farm Boy, has been acclaimed as an accurate and entertaining portrayal of rural life in the early twentieth century. Larson says all royalties from the book are designated to a scholarship fund at the University of Wisconsin College of Agriculture.

About Cornerstone Hospice
Cornerstone Hospice and Palliative Care, Inc., a not-for-profit, community organization since 1984, provides comfort and care to Central Florida families experiencing life-limiting illnesses. Over 7,000 people in Lake, Sumter, Orange, Osceola, Polk, Hardee and Highlands counties benefit from Cornerstone programs each year. Enhanced patient and family care is made possible through the generous support of individuals and groups. For more information, to donate, or to volunteer, call 866-742-6655 or visit www.cornerstonehospice.org.

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