

Remembrances of Rachel

Classic AJC

Editor's note: From May 2009:

By **Shane Blatt**

A longtime volunteer for the Atlanta Opera, late-blooming performer and World War II veteran, the spry centenarian had an uncanny devotion to serving others.

"When I asked her recently her secret of how she lived so long, she looked at me with a twinkle in her eye and said, 'Love,'" grandnephew Dr. Ben Bernstein said. "Everyone who encountered her talked of the joy she gave them, how much she gave them."

That dedication was evident in her almost three decades of volunteering with the Atlanta Opera, a group she joined in its infancy.

"I've never heard of an instance of someone who worked full time as a volunteer for 20 years," said Paul Melroy, the opera's director of finance and administration. "She never wanted a dime. She'd get upset if you bought her lunch."

The only perk she didn't resist was cab fare when she was no longer able to drive, he said.

Although her volunteer duties had her seating people, handling tickets and making deposits, she was known most as a fixture backstage, assisting performers with their makeup and wigs, Mr. Melroy said.

"She was in all her glory when we had a production going on," Mr. Melroy said. "That's when Rachel was at her max."

Rachel Rosen Lehmann of Atlanta died Thursday from complications of a stroke at William Breman Jewish Home. She was three days shy of her 106th birthday.

The funeral is noon today at the Ahavath Achim Synagogue, 600 Peachtree Battle Ave. in Atlanta. Dressler's Jewish Funeral Care is handling arrangements.

Born in New York City, Mrs. Lehmann was dedicated to service throughout her life. In World



In 2005, the Atlanta Opera hosted a 102nd birthday party for long-time volunteer Rachel Lehmann. Lehmann invited Bill Hargrove, 104, as her date to the party after reading an article in the AJC Sports Section about the then 103-year old bowler.

War II, she was a sergeant in the Women's Army Corps and for years served as national deputy of the Jewish War Veterans.

In her later years, Mrs. Lehmann enjoyed performing. It started when she was a finalist in the Senior Miss Georgia Pageant in 1992 and blossomed when she and her troupe of seniors performed at nursing homes across metro Atlanta. Mrs. Lehmann would sing her signature tunes, "Second Hand Rose" and "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend."

"She was easily the oldest person in the group by 10 or 15 years," Mr. Melroy said. "It was all schmaltz, but she loved it. She loved dressing up. She loved performing. She wasn't afraid of doing anything."

Cristina Herrera, the opera's director of communications, said Mrs. Lehmann had a candor all her own. If she had to decline a credit card, she would tell the patron, "Darlin' ... you spent a little too much on your credit card because it didn't go through."

"She said it in an endearing way so nobody ever got mad," Herrera said.

Lindsay Smith, a ticketing services associate who started in 1999, recalled Mrs. Lehmann's flair for fashion. "Of all of us in the office, she was the only one who wore makeup and heels every day," Ms. Smith said.

And her zest for living makes it harder to believe she's gone, Ms. Smith said. "We all knew Rachel would die someday, but it never happened, so we stopped believing it."

Dr. Bernstein said that although Mrs. Lehmann didn't leave behind any immediate family, "Countless people felt she was an aunt or a grandmother or a mother to them, and she welcomed them into her life."

Editor's note: Former AJC Peach Buzz writer Richard Eldredge filed some notes from her service:

Even at her funeral on Sunday at Ahavath Achim Synagogue in Buckhead, friends and family continued to learn more about her fascinating, long life. For example, the tireless volunteer for the Fox Theatre and the Atlanta Opera has seat no. BB65 permanently named for her at the Fox.

During the hour-long service, Lehmann's rabbi, family and friends evoked both tears and laughs as they shared stories about our former reader who famously scored a date with bowler Bill Hargrove, a fellow centenarian, after reading about him in the AJC.

Her great niece New York actress Didi Conn (who is perhaps best known by two generations of movie fans for playing "Beauty School Dropout" Frenchy in "Grease") recalled a conversation with Lehmann as she was preparing for her first date with Hargrove in 2005.

"At my age, I don't often go out with an older man," Conn recounted Lehmann telling her. "Should I call him Bill, Mr. Hargrove or Daddy?"

As one of the oldest residents at Atlanta's Zaban Tower retirement community, Conn once observed a friend introduce Lehmann to her mother, a reluctant new Zaban resident.

Remembered Conn: "She told Rachel, 'You're going to be seeing a lot more of my mother now.' Rachel's reply? 'Why? Is she about to undress?'"