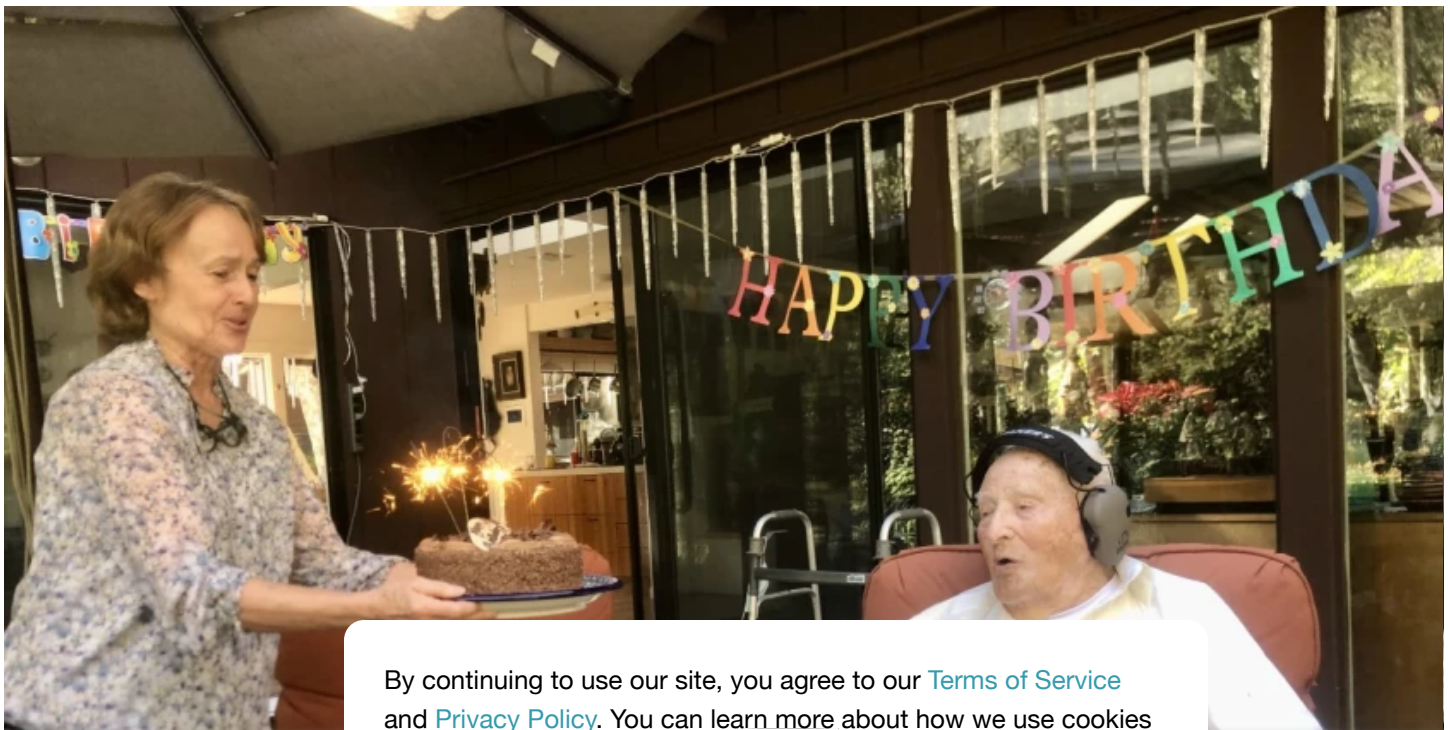




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Column: The secret to a long life? Curiosity, says Morrie, who has now survived two pandemics



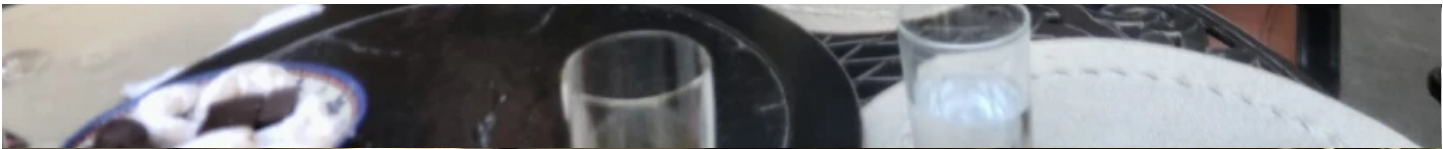
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Morrie Markoff at his 108th birthday celebration with his daughter-in-law, Jadwiga. (Steve Lopez / Los Angeles Times)

BY STEVE LOPEZ | COLUMNIST

JAN. 14, 2022 4:30 PM PT



At his birthday party on Wednesday, Morrie Markoff was telling me about his family’s rough ride through the pandemic. His older brother died, and for a while it looked as though Morrie might follow him.

“My mother thought she was going to lose me because I had a 104-degree temperature,” Morrie said. “And I fought it off. Amazing.”

What’s more amazing is that Morrie wasn’t talking about the current pandemic. He was talking about the Spanish flu of 1918.

Morrie just turned 108.

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“He’s now the 24th-oldest person in the United States,” said Morrie’s son, Steve, who hosted the birthday party in his backyard in Pacific Palisades.

CALIFORNIA

Column: These three Angelenos, ages 106, 101 and almost 90, haven’t let coronavirus dim their spirits

April 8, 2020

Morrie Markoff comes in three years behind the leader of the pack, according to an internet gerontology site.

At his party, Morrie was thinking, talking and even singing to his wife Betty, who died at 103. Most marriages have their ups and downs, and so did Morrie’s and Betty’s. But in her absence, he seems to have fallen for her all over again.

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Morrie Markoff, then 99, and his wife Betty, 97, are shown in their home in Los Angeles in 2013. (Gary Friedman / Los Angeles Times)

“You were my girl,” he sang to the woman he refers to as Betsy. “I wake up in the morning to greet the newborn day. I can’t wait to see you and say, ‘Betsy doll, I love you. I love you.’”

I asked Morrie if he thinks he might be with her again, somewhere, and he said he doesn’t know what’s out there beyond this life.

“Nobody has been there and back,” he said.

I corrected him, reminding Morrie that he and I met because we had both briefly kicked the bucket. In 2012, I wrote that I had been resuscitated after flatlining with sudden cardiac arrest. Morrie emailed me to say [we should “hang around,”](#) because the same thing had happened to him the day before he turned 99.

He invited me to the LADWP cafeteria, across the street from his Bunker Hill apartment, and we had a cup of coffee. Since then I’ve been to Morrie’s 100th birthday, Betty’s 100th and their 75th wedding anniversary

“Being old hasn’t h

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Not long after I made their acquaintance, the Markoffs were exploring downtown Los Angeles by bus when they met a fellow passenger who happened to be the owner of an art gallery. Morrie mentioned that he used to own an appliance repair shop in Hollywood, and in his spare time, he made sculpture out of scraps of metal.

The gallery owner took a look at his work, was flabbergasted by the quality, and hosted Morrie’s first-ever [art exhibit](#) at her Chinatown gallery.

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Betty and Morrie Markoff at their son Steve's home, where a party was held for Betty on Aug. 27, 2016, in Pacific Palisades. She turned 100 the day before, Aug. 26. (Gary Friedman / Los Angeles Times)

Morrie was 100 at the time.

For his next project, Morrie worked day and night on [a memoir](#). He called it “Keep Breathing,” which was his long-running answer to anyone who asked him the secret of a long life. Morrie, a New York native, sold his new book at a booth at the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books.

He was 103.

One day my late colleague Gary Friedman and I were visiting the Markoffs when Friedman learned that Morrie had been an amateur photographer for decades. Morrie brought out his photo albums and Friedman, an ace photographer himself, said Morrie’s black and white images belonged in a museum.

“His joy of life, and his curiosity, that’s really kept him alive. Plus good genes,” said Steve Markoff. “Everything to him is exciting. How did this happen? How did that happen?”

Morrie told me he thinks he was born curious.

“Nobody can see around the corner,” he said. “But I’m going to look. So I started traveling the world when I was about 14.”

When Morrie finished his first book, he started another. He told me last year that he thought he was dupli-

cating him from within.

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that didn’t

shed in the



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Morrie writes in longhand on lined paper. Old school. Steve and his wife, Jadwiga, said that every week, he completes another 30 or 40 pages of random thoughts, sometimes more. A lot of the material is loaded onto Morrie's blog.

"I am a prudent man," Morrie wrote last August. "I will take all advised precautions not to be infected by the current deadly coronavirus everyday taking its toll. ... For sure, the current virus is more deadly than the 1918 influenza pandemic."

CALIFORNIA

Thriving 99-year-old is right at home in today's lively downtown L.A.

Sept. 21, 2013

Here's an entry from November:

"I am relaxed, worn out and thinking about the long life I have lived and what I have accomplished. Starting out as a poor kid in a vermin-infested New York tenement to my life now. As a realist I know I won't be around much longer. I ask myself if there is anything I haven't done that I want to do. *Nada.*"

Morrie celebrated his 108th with his family — Steve, Jadwiga, Thomas, Emily, Nancy, Ha'ile and Danny. Daughter Judith, who celebrated from afar in Seattle, told me it seems as though her father is getting younger rather than older.

Morrie's present was a T-shirt bearing the name of his book — "Keep Breathing." Jadwiga brought out a cake lit up with sparklers and Morrie smiled.

Did he care to mak

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“That I make it to 109.”

Morrie Markoff at his 108th birthday celebration. (Steve Loney/Los Angeles Times)

Steve.Loney@latimes.com

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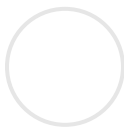
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California native Steve Lopez has been a journalist for 45 years. His work has won numerous national awards for newspaper and magazine writing. He is the author of several books, including the best-selling “The Soloist,” a story that began on the pages of the Los Angeles Times, where he has been a columnist since 2001.

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