



A Better Life? Laughter and Wisdom from Immigrant Elders

We decided to check up on the immigrant elders in our lives to see how they're surviving the pandemic. What we found was joy, wisdom, life experience and plenty of laughter — from two Italian immigrants in San Francisco, to a Haitian couple in Florida, to a 93-year-old aunt in Bangalore.

Mia Warren: Early on in the pandemic, I found myself craving laughter, and I thought, where can I find it? Everything was so scary. Then, it occurred to me that the elders in my community make me happy. I love hearing the stories they tell.

Margaret Gomez: So we got here on a Saturday. I'll never forget. And Tito Archie went out to get the paper and he comes back and it's like a foot tall! [Laughs.]

Rosalind Tordesillas: [Laughs.]

Margaret: The *New York Times* was like, my God, it was like a mattress!

Rosalind: [Laughs.]

Mia: I'm Mia Warren, and this is "A Better Life?" — a podcast from Feet in 2 Worlds.

Hearing laughter is something I've missed these past few months. The year 2020 has prevented us from celebrating together and sharing joy.

So this season on "A Better Life?," we produced a segment, "Call Your Elders," where we spoke to older immigrants about their lives and how they're surviving the pandemic.

On this podcast episode, we'll be revisiting those conversations. We'll connect an aunt in Bangalore to her niece in New York. We'll listen in on two friends in San Francisco reminiscing about their lives in Italy. We'll hear a Greek couple on Long Island exploring new ways of being together. And we'll tune in to two Filipina immigrants writing a love letter to their adopted home of New York City.

But first, here's Florence Barrau-Adams, a radio producer and sound design professor at NYU film school. Florence lives in New Jersey. Shortly after lockdown, she called up her parents. They immigrated to the U.S. from Haiti in 1968, and now live in Florida.

Florence Barrau-Adams: My parents, Monique and Eric Barrau, have been in self-isolation since March, rarely leaving home. Our family has kept in touch with regular Zoom sessions and my sisters and I and other family members have supported them with home deliveries. I had a chance to hang out with them over the internet one Sunday evening to catch up. My niece, Kristen, who lives with my parents, recorded their end of the conversation.

Florence: Hi. Can you start by telling everyone your name and how old you are?

Eric Barrau: How many years can we hide, do I have to say the truth?

Florence: Whatever you want to say, Dad.

Eric: [Laughs.] My name is Eric Barrau. I'm the father of three beautiful ladies, and our family is made of 18 members nowadays, we are a big picture in our living room. We keep on looking at them and counting. And, uh.

Monique Barrau: My wife's name.

Eric: My wife's name is Monique Oriol Barrau. She just reminded me, I thought she was going to say it herself. So anyway, I am 82 years of age.

Florence: How about you, Mom?

Monique: I am 79 years old.

Florence: That's right.

Eric: And her name is Monique, by the way. They said, *chéri*, call your name.

Florence: Okay. So tell me, how was your day today? What did you do?

Eric: Well, normally, today is Sunday, first of all, the Sunday, we take Mass on the TV.

Monique: Yeah.

Clip: Lord Jesus Christ, who said to your apostles, peace I leave you, my peace I give you.

Eric: And so, when we wake up, I wake your mother up. I go make coffee for her. I make her a breakfast, which consists of half a banana, then she takes her coffee. I turn the TV on 243, which is where they have the Mass, so she has her Mass sitting in her *fauteuil* there.

Monique: Recliner! [Laughs.]

Eric: Drinking coffee, and that's the best way to go to church. [Laughs.] So after

that, we come down.

Monique: Get dressed, and we have breakfast.

Eric: Fix breakfast. You know who fixes breakfast?

Florence: Who does?

Eric: I do. [Laughs.]

Monique: Just on Sundays! On Sundays, he's the one.

Eric: [Laughs.] Aw, come on!

Florence: So how have you liked or disliked having the family taking care of you, now that you're home?

Eric: We [Laughs.]

Florence: You can be honest.

Eric: Oh well, let me say that, you, Florence, our daughter that lives in New Jersey.

Florence: Yup, that's me.

Eric: Has been very, very attentive to our problems.

Monique: Our needs.

Eric: She made a list, ordered stuff and had it delivered here. And in addition, the things that we have to renew locally on a regular basis, we're taken care of [by] Kristen, our granddaughter.

Monique: And Gessika, our niece.

Eric: Monique's niece does the same too. She buys, and when they come, she parks her car on the street, drops the bag and says "Bye! I can't come in."

Florence: What makes you happy? What brings you joy while you're home?

Monique: Usually we do things together, you know, we complete each other and-

Florence: What about you, Dad?

Eric: Ah, when?

Monique: Occupy your time, not today, Sunday.

Eric: I do, I take care of everything in the house. And let me tell you, when there's a light bulb to replace, if I go, they say, "You can't go there!" They think I'm a kid. [Laughs.]

Florence: Who's they?

Eric: Oh, well.

Monique: They! [Laughs.]

Eric: The monitor, she's sitting on my left there.

Florence: You mean Kristen, your granddaughter.

Eric: She wants to know, "Who did that! How can you go up there!" I say, "Well, I still do things." [Laughs.] So anyway.

Florence: So taking care of things, taking care of Mom and the house makes you happy?

Eric: Well, I'll say yes. [Laughs.] She's looking at me. I can't answer. I'll give you the answer another time. [Laughs.]

Florence: We'll Zoom later. Okay.

Eric: [Laughs.]

Monique: Oh, my goodness.

Florence: I know that we've talked about, as a family about the importance of you all getting some exercise and really taking care of yourself. Can you tell us what your routine is, what you have figured out to do in the house?

Monique: Yeah. What we do is in the morning we try to walk from the front door to around.

Eric: The living room, the dining room.

Monique: And I can have nine laps or more in five minutes. And I keep on going and your dad also.

Eric: Don't forget you asked me to put the music on for you.

Monique: And he goes.

Eric: She wants me to put the music because she dances.

Monique: He does not volunteer the music, he's always, you know. [Laughs.]

Florence: Dad, you don't like to have the music on?

Monique: He is... I don't like to say it. [Laughs.]

Eric: What is it?

Florence: Say what, Mom? Go for it, say it. Say it.

Monique: He does not volunteer things like that, you know. He just go, go...making sure that he pass me, you know? [Laughs.]

Florence: Wait. You're telling me as you're walking around the living room, Dad feels the need to pass you, to go faster? [Laughs.]

Eric: Several times. [Laughs.]

Eric: When we do the exercise, when we do the exercise, she's watching the time. I say the time is good for you, but the number of times you go around makes the difference. If I can make three times, three turns when she does one, if she does 15 minutes, in five minutes I accomplish more than she does.

Monique: I call that a little exaggeration.

Florence: A little?

Eric: Well.

Monique: If I said, "Okay, I'm going to walk for 15 minutes or 20 minutes," after five minutes he's done!

Eric: Because I have covered what she covers in 20 minutes! [Laughs.]

Monique: Don't worry because I don't care. [Laughs.] I do what I have to do and you know? [Laughs.]

Florence: Right. How does this moment compare to other difficult times in your life? Um, you left Haiti, you came to the States. You had to re-establish, from scratch. Like, you had to start from nothing. How would you say this time, this situation, is compared to the things that you went through earlier in your life?

Eric: So you're talking about by the time we came to the States from our country?

Florence: Yeah.

Eric: We are more at home here than we were in our country.

Monique: We were young.

Eric: Our life is like three parts. Our adolescence...we went to school. We graduated, and then we left Haiti. And we came to live in New York, New Jersey area.

Florence: So that's part two.

Eric: That's part two and then from there.

Monique: We raised our kids.

Eric: We spent 20 years in that New York, New Jersey area. And then we moved to Florida. And we've been here 32 years. More time in the States than we did in Haiti. But the life, for some reason, took us from leaving Haiti in the middle of a dictator, where people were burning. People were killing people in the street, literally. We came in this country and it was the '60s. The late '60s when Martin Luther King was killed. Robert Kennedy was killed and there was riots and everything.

Monique: Turmoil.

Eric: And then when we packed up, we came to Florida. We had other problems. And now we have this experiment, that's basically life. As a matter of fact, 9/11, we were in Florida. This is the Florida event of our experiment, with big problem. We didn't know, will life become normal again, the same as we do today. But I'm sure there is a solution to every problem because we have a system in this country that is more regimented than the individual. So. In Haiti, you have a problem. You could not solve it. Over here, it will get solved because we are in America.

Florence: Hm.

Eric: Life is not simple. We have to live. Challenges, we go through them.

Monique: And we learn to take one day at a time. And that helped a lot, because I always said, "Every problem has a solution and the solution is tomorrow." And with that philosophy, I really do not suffer much, from anything. Because I just...let go.

Florence: Well, thank you very much.

Monique: Well, that was a pleasure having you.

Florence: Awesome.

Mia: That was Eric Barrau and Monique Barrau speaking with their daughter, Florence Barrau-Adams.

Many of Florence's family members contributed to this piece. The interview was recorded by Eric and Monique's granddaughter, Kristen Palestis. The music you heard them exercising to was performed by their grandson, Stephen Pena. And you can check out photos of the Barraus on our website...taken by another granddaughter, Danielle Pena.

Next, we move to the west coast — to San Francisco, where Sara Marinelli is a radio producer and writer. She came from Italy to the United States more than a decade ago. Sara's friend, Maria de Venezia, is also Italian. The two came together to reflect on life during quarantine.

Sara Marinelli: I've never missed Italy as much as I did during the peak of this pandemic. In March and April, I watched videos of Italians playing music on their balconies every day, and I so wanted to be there.

I wanted my old balcony back. Instead, I was trapped in my apartment, hurting from the forced separation.

Desperate for a connection, I began recording my Italian radio show from my closet. I gathered the songs that people were playing in Italy, and asked Italian expats to request music that brought them comfort. I called the collection "Songs Against Fear."

When I played the songs on the show, I felt comforted too. I know other Italian immigrants who felt the same.

In June, when lockdown in San Francisco was less strict, I went to visit Maria De Venezia, and see how she was doing.

Sara: Ciao Maria, how are you? So nice to see you.

Maria De Venezia: How are you? I'm so happy to see you again. I'm really, really happy. I'm regretting I cannot hug you.

Sara: No, we can't hug. But maybe we can do the fake Italian kiss.

Maria: Yes.

Sara: [Laughs.]

Maria: [Laughs.]

Sara: Maria is 76 years old. She's been living in San Francisco for 25 years. I met her through Italian Community Services, a local organization that supports Italian elders.

Though we are new friends, I treasure Maria. She's warm, inviting, and she comes from the same generation as my mother.

Sara: During the peak of the pandemic, for us, watching the news was absolutely heartbreaking. How did you feel about, you know, watching the news?

Maria: I was devastated. Devastated because, uh, first of all, here, we were able to go out and walk in the street. They couldn't leave. Not even the district, just one block. I remember that a friend of mine told me, "I go three, four, five times down to the street to put the garbage, just to breathe some air." They were really becoming crazy. And then when I heard about Bergamo and all the long line of, uh, coffin to be cremated, I still have goosebumps. I couldn't believe that the people who are losing their dear...they couldn't be in contact with them. They couldn't touch them. They couldn't hold their arms. That was something that really, I was devastated by that.

Sara: Me too.

Maria: 170 doctors died and some of them were already retired, but they...they were called to go back and, and work in the hospital and they died. That was something I still...if I think about that, I have goosebumps.

Sara: Absolutely. I remember that very clearly. And um, some days I was in a state of panic, crying at night. And, uh, did you ever feel that, uh, "Wow, this country is not going to exist anymore." Did you feel that something really disastrous?

Maria: No. I think the Italians have a lot of strength and courage because they went through hell during the war. And so sometimes they are able to fight against, also, coronavirus a little bit better because of, uh, what they went through. And they also are able to overcome difficulties in their own ways. Like you mentioned before, singing on the deck and playing music. I think that's something that, a virtue that they have. And so Italy will not disappear. I didn't feel that. What about you? Did you feel that?

Sara: No. No, not that way. Not that way. I was very afraid about my family.

Maria: Yeah, me too.

Sara: I was so afraid that...

Maria: ...someone could become sick.

Sara: Yeah, I could lose my parents.

Maria: Without being there.

Sara: Without being there. That was most of the source of anxiety and panic came from not being able to say goodbye to my parents if they died, because as you know, that's what was happening in Italy. People were dying every day, in high numbers. And I didn't know how to comfort myself. What brought you comfort?

Maria: Many things. I have to say the comfort is that to check the health of my friends and my family in Italy, more or less every day. I was happy to know that they were safe. Another interesting thing that I started doing with my husband, who is a really good cook...[Laughs.]

Sara: Nice.

Maria: ...is working in the kitchen with him. And it was a great pleasure because he started making fresh bread, fresh pasta, and biscotti. [Laughs.]

Sara: More Italian than that. What can you get?

Maria: Yes, exactly, exactly. But it's so nice because, you know, being able to learn how to make the dough is very difficult and then my hands are weak while his hands are so strong. So, I mean, I learn how to do it, how to move my hands in one way and then sideway to make bread, and then eating our products at the end of the day. [Laughs.]

Sara: It's satisfying.

Maria: Yeah. I enjoy it a lot. Also because you know, this is our life and really, we have to love each other because we don't know if it will last a long time or not. And so we tried to cook the best food. [Laughs.]

Sara: It's true...all this homemade...

Maria: How about you? What did you do? What were your tools to overcome this terrible time?

Sara: For me, when I was really in these days of panic, one thing that helped me to soothe the anxiety was to write. Writing in Italian. And this is interesting because I've been here for 13 years. I've been writing stories in English. I've been working on a book in English. I thought, for many years, that I couldn't write in Italian again. Then, suddenly, I took an empty notebook in March and I started writing a diary.

Maria: In Italian.

Sara: Yes. I called it "Letters to Italy." "Lettere all'Italia," as if Italy were my lover...far away from me. I would shut down everything and just sit at my kitchen table. And I felt that that was home. It was a really strange sensation. I was not home, you know?

Maria: [Laughs.]

Sara: ...but I felt like I was gaining something again that I had lost. One of the letters became an essay, and I called it "L'Italia in una stanza."

Maria: It's like the song. [Laughs.]

Sara: Like the song, “The Sky In a Room.” “Italy in my room.” And I was talking about if I am really sheltering in place and I don't talk to anyone in English, and I write in Italian, I read books in Italian. For days, I could feel that I was immersing myself in Italy.

Maria: The whole body was there. Yeah...

Sara: Exactly. Exactly. That's exactly what it was. I felt like my soul, my body was there and it was an illusion that...

Maria: Allows you to suffer less in some way. Right?

Sara: Yes. Did you have anything similar that helped you to recreate this sense of home?

Maria: First of all, we have a good selection of DVD that every year we buy in Italy. And so we decided to watching them again. We started from Sicily because my husband is half Sicilian, but Sicily is a very interesting island. So we started watching *The Leopard*. Then we saw “La Siciliana Ribelle,” that it's a movie that gives you goosebumps again. It's the story of a, a daughter of a mafioso. It was a mafioso, but it was a good mafioso. But anyway, I don't want to say anything...

Sara: [Laughs.]

Maria: But it's a beautiful, beautiful movie. We saw *Cinema Paradiso*...

Sara: Si.

Maria: And then *Viola Di Mare*. It's, the two lesbians in Sicily and oh, it's very, very, I mean, I like it a lot. Anyway, we were very concerned about enlarging our knowledge about Sicily.

Sara: I did the same thing. I started watching some Italian movies that I had missed. Interesting that you started with Sicily. I definitely started with Naples. And I don't know if you watched it yourself. “My Brilliant Friend” by Elena Ferrante, the HBO adaptation?

Maria: No, I didn't see it, but I read the book.

Sara: It was absolutely moving for me to be far away from Italy, watching these girls in Naples. I just identified so much. One episode in particular, I start crying from beginning to the end.

Maria: Awww.

Sara: [Laughs.] I was just crying about Napoli, about the girls, about Italy, about my family and thinking about my life and the choices that I had made of leaving Naples, and now being stuck here and thinking, “When can I go again? When can I see my family?” So you know, I started questioning my choice, which is not a good thing to do...

Maria: But it’s natural. Questioning comes out.

Sara: Yes. How was it for you? Did you feel a little bit that way?

Maria: You know, the thing is that I divided into two. And sometimes I feel like, “Am I meat? Am I fish?” When I am, you know, because when I am in Italy, I know that I have another life in some other place, like in San Francisco, but I really am Italian there.

And when I’m here, it’s already 25 years. I feel like, yes, I know, I have another life in Italy, but I’m here now. Sometimes it’s a struggle. What am I? Am I Italian? Am I American? Which is the best place to live? I start with comparing how many friends I have here. How many friends I’ve, uh, over there. I think if people who don’t experience this kind of, uh, life, they don’t understand what’s it’s...inside your mind.

Sara: Also, another thing I don’t know if it happened to you: I would have these dreams, especially during the hardest moment of lockdown, about streets of Naples, balconies, piazzas, I would wake up with these really vivid images in my mind. [Laughs.] And it brought me comfort in the moment, but also a little bit of sadness because they were not real.

Maria: Right. Yeah, as soon as you wake up, you realize that they are just dreams. But still, it was like going back a little bit and being in Italy a little bit. And I mean, I’m still Italian. [Laughs.]

Mia: That was Sara Marinelli and Maria De Venezia in San Francisco.

The songs you heard at the top of the episode were “Nessun dorma” from Puccini’s Turandot and “Viva L’Italia” by Francesco De Gregori.

For couples, life in lockdown has inspired...or forced...new dynamics within established relationships. Philip and Niki Zias have been together for more than six decades. They immigrated to New York from Greece in 1962. Their granddaughter, Anna Dilena, is our assistant producer. She spoke to Philip and Niki about how their marriage has evolved during quarantine.

Anna Dilena: My pappou has always loved food. In fact, his favorite story to tell is about his first time ordering at an American restaurant, where instead of asking for a *servino* of chicken, he asked for the *whole* chicken. Either way, he still managed to eat the entire thing.

Now, at the age of 82 years old, he is still learning how to adapt to new circumstances.

Philip Zias: You ready to hear this? I never thought I can cook. Not even, uh, to, to wash a plate. No, not even to, to boil an egg. I never thought. And uh, also from my tradition in the family, in the, my country, the men don't cook, only the woman The men only eating, not cooking.

Anna: After my pappou met my yiayia, they moved to Bayside, Queens. They were surrounded by a Greek community that always centered around the church. My yiayia would often throw parties and prepare food for over 60 people, especially when it was time to celebrate my pappou's name day: an Orthodox-Christian tradition to honor the apostle Philip, the saint he was named after.

Niki Zias: Yes, of course, all the job I did it. Always I hear my name. 'Niki, give me that. Give me this. Give me that.' Even doesn't even take the underwear from the drawer. All the womans give that. [Speaks Greek.] [Laughs.]

Anna: My grandparents haven't been apart for 64 years. And after being isolated in their home for months, they discovered a whole new way of being together.

Philip: As I remember, all my life, I never saw something like this. In the second world war, about four years old, I was. I didn't get so, so much scaring, not even my parents, but now this virus is very scary.

Niki: I live[d] in a little island, eight children in the family. I never be sick and I never hear even from my grandma, from my mother. Uh, sometimes I sick in summer, I have a little fever and I go to the doctor, give me medication, and a couple of days I feel perfect.

Philip: Anna, I'm telling you the truth, in the beginning, I didn't believe it was so big thing, the virus. And I started scaring because I'm, uh, I have, uh, diabetes and I, I feel, uh, if I get sick, I gonna be die. And I stay home with, uh, no communication with nobody, not even with the family.

I used with my friends to play once a week poker. We play now for 20 years. We never stop. And this year, we stopped playing. We are afraid to meet each other and we keep calling from each other by phone. That's, that's the big thing for me and for my friends too.

Niki: I'm not missing poker game because I'm not playing and I hate the poker.

Philip: [Speaks Greek.]

Niki: No, I don't play, I don't play poker. I miss the driving. I miss the stores. I miss the shopping. I miss to go to my daughter's house.

Philip: I missed, I missed a lot. Uh, the, the parties. The best time in my life I had — I had those years. My wife is an excellent, and a good, good cooker. She was making so nice food. Everybody was waiting when we gonna make celebrate — some celebrate to come at my house to eat my wife's food, or the cakes, or the cookies.

Niki: ...and I cook almost one week. I invite 60 people in the house and the half week cook and the another half week bake. Everybody comes to see the table. Everybody's surprised. So I cook, I take care of the kids and I'm sewing the dress I wear on the party.

Philip:...but we had music, a lot of music, life music.

Niki: I knew it is a lot of work, but it make me happy that time because I'm young, but now I stop cause I'm older, you know? The grandchildren come, so I make cake and I bring to my daughter house, special koulourakia — the grandchildren love it. So now I wait, my daughter, she's gonna make parties.

Right now, I feel much better because I live together for my husband. I'm not going anywhere. I stay for three months inside the house and I started to teach him to cook...

Philip: I try to cook and whatever I can I know I do it, whatever I don't know, I am asking. Every little while I'm calling her, 'How you're doing this? How do you do this?

Philip: You wanna...ας το κάνουμε (let's make) hamburgers?

Niki: No, no, no.

Philip: Fry?

Niki: Ναι, ναι. (Yes, yes.)

Philip: Ah, fry.

Philip: She's teaching excellent. And, uh, I'm very, very happy. We cooking every day, every day, different foods.

Niki: I teach him a lot of recipes. Soup, dolmades, pita, stuffed peppers, leg of lamb and potatoes, pastichio, mousaka...

Philip: You like I cut some tomatoes from the garden?

Niki: Δεν έχεις? (You don't have?)

Philip: Εχω, έχω. (I have, I have.)

Philip: We did uh, a kind of shrimps with, uh, sauce, but different way. And, uh, the sauce, we make a separate sauce, separate the shrimps...

Niki: No, the shrimps they put on the sauce.

Philip: Yeah, alright.

Niki: And then they have the rice white.

Philip: It's a lot, a lot of work on this, too mess for the kitchen, but, in the end you have a good food. [Laughs.]

Anna: I asked my pappou, who is a better cook, you or yia yia?

Philip: Whatever she knows. I learned exactly like her, when, when you taste food from her and taste from my food, it's the same tasting.

Anna: I then asked my yiayia the same question.

Niki: Eh, of course, of course I'm better! [Laughs.] Some secrets I don't, I don't give to him. I keep it for myself.

Mia: That was Anna Dilena, speaking with her grandparents, Philip and Niki Zias.

The music you heard was a Greek folk song called [gyftopoula], which translates to gypsies. It was played and sung by Philip Zias on his bouzouki.

In most of these conversations, our producers were checking in with their immigrant elders. But for this next one, we decided to switch it up a bit. Ramaa Reddy is a travel and food journalist in New York City. Although she's lived in the U.S. for years, Ramaa remains closely connected to India, and the people who shaped her as a young woman.

Ramaa Reddy: My aunt Indira is an alert and sharp 93-year-old and I've always admired her for her grace and intellect. She lives with her son and daughter-in-law in Bangalore.

I lived with my aunt for a couple of years as an undergraduate, while my parents were living abroad.

I've been thinking about Indiratta a lot these days. So I called her up to see how she was doing.

Ramaa: Who's the one person that you want to hug when this lockdown is over?

Indira Reddy: Can I give you a hug from here? [Laughs.] All my lovely nephews and nieces. I love and I could hug all of you and bless you and, and hope things go well for all of you.

Ramaa: That is so nice. I'm giving you back my hug. [Laughs.] And all my kisses.

We are, uh, going through such a difficult time right now with Covid-19. Um, have you ever lived through anything like this in your life?

Indira: Never. Never, Ramaa. But I remember long ago, my mother's aunt...she'd say there was this terrible disaster that came as the influenza in the turn of the century...you know, she was a very elderly person, like I am at this age, she was at that age when she was talking to us. She said, "You don't know the hundreds of thousands of people who died during that period." But she would still have horror in her voice when she would talk at that age. She was a young woman at that time.

But there wasn't this isolation...people would get infected and they would die. This pandemic was the first time where people were aware — made aware of the seriousness. This, it was almost like an attack on humanity...and you didn't know whether you'd pull through.

Ramaa: Indiratta grew up during British rule in India. Her father was Director of Agriculture of the Madras Presidency, an important position in India's agrarian economy. I asked Indiratta to describe a scene post India's independence, when she was in her thirties.

Indira: We used to go up to the hills every year for a short fortnight visit. And we used to go to Ooty, which is in the Western Ghats. It was a very small town. When the summer heat and the dust was unbearable in the plains, and we'd go to the hills and it would be so beautifully pleasant. There was no dust, there was no heat. I remember walking into the glades...there would be pine trees and eucalyptus trees and the perfume of the pine needles. When you tread on it, you get that beautiful smell. Your — your feet would crunch on the pine needles. And there would be these massive eucalyptus trees with their blueish green leaves. And walk down and find...they're not farmers, they're really tribal people...they would collect wild mushrooms and strawberries and pack them in little baskets with leaves tucked into the basket and they'd put the wild mushrooms on top so that the basket would look chunky and nice for the buyers.

The strawberries...they were small, but very sweet and made a perfect, uh, dessert with cream and the dusting of sugar. And, um, in the evenings, it would be chilly

and we'd sit on the carpet with the plates on our laps and enjoy our wild mushrooms and our, uh, strawberries.

Ramaa: I'm curious...how was life like during the British occupation? Um...did you have any interaction with the British?

Indira: When I was in school, I went to a school in Ooty, which was a convent school, and most of the children there were the children of expatriates who had posted in the plains and they wanted the children to escape the heat and they were sent to Ooty. There were lots of girls and they were very, very friendly.

Ramaa: Yeah. Uh, but, uh, do you think it was comfortable for all of India during the British period or just for upper-class Indians?

Indira: I don't think, um, everyone was happy...there was a lot of resentment. There was that feeling that they were the rulers and we were the — we were the ruled.

I remember my father once came home furious and he was telling my mother that he had a brush up with one of the advisors, who was an Englishman. And he had been particularly rude in spite of the fact that my father was the head of the department and so highly qualified there. That other man, who was an Englishman, thought that he could push him around. That was their attitude.

Ramaa: How do you feel India is today in comparison?

Indira: We're, of course, extremely proud of the fact that we are free and we are independent and we are respected. And we count as a country that matters in the world affairs.

Ramaa: What's your hope for tomorrow?

Indira: That I should pass away peacefully, Ramaa. There is nothing more that you want out of life. I've had so much love from all you children that what more can I want?

So when I always say, tell people...never mourn when someone old has passed away. It's a fulfilled life. And it's a natural thing. You grieve only when someone passes away when they're young and they have responsibilities, that is, that is true sorrow. So it's been a good life, no regrets and it's...and whatever comes tomorrow, I'll accept it with joy.

Ramaa: When I was in college, you opened your home to me and so many of my cousins. And we came and stayed for many years. And, uh, one of the things I loved the most was, uh, having dinner together at seven o'clock every night. And it was so beautiful. And I want to thank you so much for doing that for me, because it kind of, uh, gave me, um, I don't know, a feeling of family.

Indira: No thanks are necessary. I loved having everyone.

And, and I was so happy that you children were there to give companionship to my two children. It gave me so much joy just to see a house full of children and you being all happy and laughing and argumentative, and yet loving each other and spending time together. I felt it was a blessing. It gave me as much pleasure as it must have given to you. I still remember you as a child coming and sitting on my lap and me holding on to you. I felt blessed that I was able to communicate and love so many people without any...there were no conditions. It was an unconditional love that I had for all of you.

Ramaa: I felt it that way too. It was true, unconditional love. This has been such a beautiful conversation with you...so thank you so much.

Indira: Thank you darling...give my love, to the children and Harish.

Mia: That was producer Ramaa Reddy speaking with her aunt, Indira Reddy, in Bangalore, India.

For our final Call Your Elders, we have a conversation between two Filipina immigrants from different generations who have made New York City their home. Rosalind Tordesillas immigrated to the U.S. from the Philippines in 1989. In those early years, one person in her family was her lifeline to everything New York and American.

Rosalind Tordesillas: Since my husband Jake and I settled in New York, Tita Margaret and Tito Archie have been our closest relatives. But when they came over from the Philippines in the '70s, they didn't realize they'd end up planting a stake in New York for their clan.

Tita Margaret is 72 now. After decades in the city, she and Tito Archie moved to a seaside town two years ago. I wanted to hear *her* story of coming to the United States.

Margaret Gomez: We were just 23 years old. We didn't know how scary it was because we just weren't attuned to the scary parts. We were attuned to the — the promise of our lives together. That was what really, um, pulled us forward and, and also the optimism for what, what could be possible.

So we got here on a Saturday. I'll never forget. And Tito Archie went out to get the paper and he comes back and it's like a foot tall! [Laughs.]

Rosalind: [Laughs.]

Margaret: The *New York Times* was like, my God, it was like a mattress!

Rosalind: [Laughs.]

Margaret: And he plunks it down — we were staying in a hotel — and he plunks it down. And we're like, "Oh! You know, like, oh my God, all this is happening in

New York. Wow! ” There was a big thick, classified ad section. And, um, you know, we had read that that’s where you went to look for jobs.

Rosalind: In Jake’s family, you were kind of like the forerunners, right? You’re the first people in their family to sort of open the way into, into New York. And so when we got here, we were kind of looking to you...

Margaret: Oh wow.

Rosalind: ...gaining from your experience. And you sort of introduced us to, to the city and to life here. I remember there was this restaurant, America. You remember that?

Margaret: Oh yeah. [Laughs.]

Rosalind: [Laughs.] And it seemed like everyone who was new in the city, you would take them there.

Margaret: It was downtown in the Flatiron district...and it was cavernous. It was huge! And it was painted with idealistic, um, American, um, posters. Huge American flag. Sweeping plains of dairy land with cows and the Statue of Liberty with flags all over and stars shining on the floor from these spotlights that actually beamed down starlight on the floor as you walked in. And, uh, when you, when you came in to the restaurant, they would greet you and they would say, “Welcome to America!” [Laughs.] It was wild! And we loved it so much.

Clip: “America is now the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic.”
“America has passed the grim milestone of 20,500 deaths to overtake Italy as...”
“200,000 empty chairs were set up on the Ellipse this weekend, each representing ten people...”

Rosalind: What’s been the hardest part of this for you?

Margaret: In the very beginning, what was really terrifying was that, um, we didn’t know where it was coming from, the, um, the virus. That it could come anywhere and from anything and everything.

It is impossible to explain the panic that we felt...it kept on magnifying, we were engulfed with, uh, with a...a fear of being helpless...not knowing how to really take care of our — ourselves. And I thought, you know, we have to be strong for each other and more so, I thought I’ve got to command myself so that I don’t drive Tito Archie down.

Rosalind: Was that a first for you, just sort of really feeling out of control? Is that something you’ve not experienced before?

Margaret: We have experienced it, actually. During 9/11. You know, that was really, um, perhaps the most terrifying prior to this. Um, you know Tito Archie

was in the building and made it out. So, um, that stayed with us and it's still with us nonetheless.

But this was a very different experience. It was like something's coming in and it's going to take over my health. And, uh, versus a bomb is going to explode and we're going to be blown to smithereens.

Rosalind: You've seen New York come through really bad things, right?

Margaret: Yes.

Rosalind: This pandemic...it was really hit hard. Do you have a response to people who think, like, this is the end?

Margaret: Yeah, when we went through the worst of times for us during the horrific fear that engulfed us during 9/11 and wondering if we'd ever see New York come back...New York was on its knees. New York was decimated. People were leaving. People were cursing New York. Some people don't even realize what 9/11 was...they read the stories about it, but did they feel, like, a dagger in their heart that reached in and extracted their, their, their entrails? I mean, no, but that's how we still feel about it!

And we were even wondering if we had to leave then. But we always wondered about what would happen next. You can carry that thread through New York's...the spirit that crashed...lifting itself back up, lifting the people with it, and the people striving to make it even better. And then crashing down again with new people. Many people have left...but I remember standing in the area by Grand Central, all the fresh-faced people coming out, the kids coming out from the subways. That's a whole new generation of brand-new New Yorkers all over again.

And I think about...who am I to be jaded about New York? When it's kind of been, kind of been like this hydra. Kind of beat it down. Another head pops up, another head pops up, and 50 heads pop up, and there you go. We're brand new again.

Rosalind: With 9/11, you know, you did go through, like, a really horrific time of it and...things were really dire, but...did you, at some point say, you know, we, we survived that? We're going to be okay?

Margaret: I think I utilized compartmentalizing. Making little chapters of the horrificness, and if I could say, okay...we finished that chapter and, um, it's still bad. It's still sad. And there are so many deaths, but somehow, we're still here...to not take a broad brush and say, "Everything's horrible. I can't, I can't breathe now." You know, it's like...it's more about, okay, little chapters, and we close that chapter and we open a new one so that the stages of, of horror and, and the pandemonium in my heart and in my mind are quieted. Knowing that one chapter is complete.

Rosalind: Last time we were talking about those old pictures...are you doing a lot of that lately? Looking at old pictures?

Margaret: I have ambitions to, uh, string some photos together and see if I can create some art from that. I'm taking, like, a photo diary of things we observed. As spring moved from the winter, the shadow patterns changed. And now we're noticing that it's getting darker earlier. And so that's a chapter.

Our little photo diaries help us 'cause we look back and we say, "Wow, look at this. Remember how we were feeling at that time? I don't feel that anymore now. I have new concerns, but not those." And those really heavy duty, all-engulfing, dark, blanketing emotions...they're not here right now. You know, I'm afraid to say it 'cause I don't want to call them back into existence again. You know, it's like, "No, don't come back!"

Rosalind: [Laughs.]

Margaret: [Laughs.] But, um, yeah. Knock on wood. [Knocks.] You know? It's been, um, chapter by chapter.

Rosalind: Is this a new realization? 'Cause it's a new challenge?

Margaret: What it is is a deeper, um, experiencing of what I have been learning all along. My parents used to talk about the time before the war and after the war. And then we used to talk about before 9/11 and after 9/11, and now we're in the pandemic and I wonder...how are we going to talk about life after the pandemic and what, uh, what part of that can I be living now? What is the future that I want to create and support people through and help them see...the majesty of what can be possible?

Mia: That was Rosalind Tordesillas speaking with her aunt Margaret Gomez.

To see photos of the people who you heard on this podcast episode, visit our website, abetterlifepodcast.com/episodes.

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I'm Mia Warren. Thanks for listening.

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