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LOCAL

York revives Boston Post Cane, honors 102-year-old resident

Enclosed in a glass case, the cane will be on permanent display at the York Public Library.

By Dan Bancroft The York Weekly

Published 5:01 a.m. ET Feb. 8, 2021

YORK, Maine — How do you sum up a lifetime? When it is Daniel Patrick Donnell's life, at 102 years 11 months and counting, it's an especially difficult task.

Friends, family and community leaders gathered Thursday, some in-person and others remotely via Zoom, to honor Donnell as York's oldest citizen. He will celebrate his 103rd birthday on March 16.

Deborah Meyers, chair of the York Senior Citizen Advisory Board, presented Donnell — who is known to most as "Bud" — with the Boston Post Cane, a New England tradition that began in 1909, just nine years before Donnell was born.

"Whether it is luck, good genes or life and love of life, Mr. Donnell, also known as 'Bud,' we'd like to honor you with the cane, and we're glad you're here," Meyers said as she made the presentation at the York Public Library.

York Historical Society Executive Director Joel Lefever said the tradition of awarding canes to the eldest people in town was created by the owner of the Boston Post newspaper in a bid to boost readership.

"They were a publicity stunt ... given to the oldest man in town," Lefever said. "Then, in 1930, women were included."

York was one of about 700 towns within the paper's circulation area to receive a cane, made of ebony and topped with a 14-karat gold knob engraved with the name of the town.

"When I heard from a select board member they were looking for the cane, I said we've got it," Lefever said.

Stored away no more

Town Manager Steve Burns said the cane had been in storage at the York Historical Society for at least the past 20 years.

"No one really kept track of the names of the past honorees," he said.

That changes now, Burns said. Enclosed in a glass case, the cane will be on permanent display at the York Public Library, and the honoree will be given a framed picture to commemorate the day they were named the cane's recipient. The name of the current holder of the cane will be on display in the case, and Burns expects to have a list of ongoing honorees on a plaque that will accompany the case.

Prior to the presentation, Burns said he'd never met anyone else who experienced the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918 and ended up going through the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic as well. "Think about the span of a lifetime," he said.

Burns acknowledged the people in the room who made the ceremony possible, including Kevin McKinney, a York resident who found the Boston Post Cane at the York Historical Society. McKinney searched for the cane with help from members of York's Senior Citizen Advisory Board. Meyers said McKinney did most of the research.

McKinney said he's known the Donnells his entire life and discovered in the course of his research that he and the Donnells are related. "Likely 10th or 12th cousins," he said.

Missing his volunteering

Donnell still lives at the bottom of Simpson Lane in York Harbor, and his daughter lives in the house she and her brothers were raised in on Varrell Lane, a stone's throw from her father's house.

After his wife, Georgiana, died in 2004, Donnell began volunteering twice a week at York Hospital.

"I would greet people at the entry way on Mondays, and help carry supplies on Thursdays," he said.

Because of COVID restrictions, Donnell has had to give up his volunteer activities at York Hospital. That work earned him the United Way of York County Spirit of Service Award in

2017. Since his 100th birthday in 2018, his name has also been listed on the banner of the York Hospital website in gratitude for his service.

"I miss it," he said, "and I'd like to be back."

From 2018: Dan Donnell marks 100th birthday

With any luck, restrictions will be lifted, and Donnell will be back at the front entrance, greeting hospital visitors with a ready smile and helping hand.

Remembering years past

Bud Donnell's daughter Mary Coite, who accompanied her father to the event, said he picked out his pink shirt and pink bow tie for the occasion.

"Pink is my favorite color," Bud Donnell said, delighted to be the center of attention.

Mary's twin, Mike Donnell, was on the Zoom call, along with their younger brother Dan. All told, five generations of Donnells attended the celebration. The youngest was Bud's great-great grandchild, Landon, who is 100 years younger than the honoree.

Bud Donnell reminisced about his long life in York, but referred most of the questions to his son Mike. "He's the history buff," Bud said.

Bud Donnell has a century of memories. He and his family are happy to share them. In his youth, he met Charles and Anne Morrow Lindbergh and the actor Robert Young. More recently, former President George H.W. Bush would often tie up at the Donnell dock when he stopped to have lunch at the Stage Neck Inn.

Mike Donnell recalled that, on one occasion, the former president asked Bud how old he was. "This was when dad was in his 90s," Mike said. Upon being told Bud's age, Bush said, "My hat's off to you," then removed his Navy cap and handed it to Bud. Later on, at Mike's encouragement, Donnell asked the former president to autograph the hat so he could give it to York Hospital to be auctioned off.

With Thursday's presentation, Mike Donnell paid tribute to the occasion and to his father.

"In this time of differences and the unrelenting pandemic," he said, "it's just nice to put some nice people together to participate in this ceremony and recognize you, and celebrate with you, Dad."

When asked for the secret to his long life, Donnell was succinct: "Keep smiling, and keep moving," he said, with a twinkle in his eyes.