



# Blue Zone: HOW OLD IS OLD?

By Herbrette Richardson





## Making the CONNECTION

**W**hile on a recent visit to my high school friend Herbrette Richardson (we are both 60 now), the familiar ring of a telephone interrupted our conversation. She answered, and the side of the exchange that I could hear went something like this, “yes ma’am . . . I’ll contact them ma’am . . . okay I’ll see you Sunday.” My friend, who has always been full of life, got off the phone and excitedly began to tell me the story of the person on the other line.

Her caller was 95 years old and was still in the practice of phoning her friends from church to check on them. This woman plays the piano for her church and belongs to a Plus 90 Club there. Of course at the mention of a Plus 90 Club, many questions came to my mind about the club’s members. As it turns out, there are quite a few residents of Herbrette’s city who have managed to live into in their 90s and remain active. My friend even shared a story about a woman who is 100 years old and had just recently retired.

As fate would have it, not long before my visit, I had seen an *Oprah* special that featured Dan Buettner, author of *The Blue Zone: Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who’ve Lived the Longest* (2008). The “Blue Zone” is the term used to identify places where people live longer, healthier lives. This certainly appears to be the case in Covington, Virginia, where residents enjoy long lives, continued activity, reduced stress, and great relationships.



**DONNA REID WASHINGTON**  
Managing Editor of the Washington D.C. edition

**C**OVINGTON, VIRGINIA, came to the attention of my friend, Herbrette Richardson, when she began to search for a retirement community. Herbrette, a former educator and accomplished musician, writes:

I have lived in Washington, D.C., Lanham, Maryland, and Baltimore City and County for a total of 54 years. One weekend, my husband and I accompanied two friends on a visit to a relative of theirs in Clifton Forge, Virginia. As we traveled down Route 191, we thought the drive was peaceful and picturesque. We found the majestic beauty of the mountains breathtaking, and every prospect presented a picture pretty enough to be framed.

Prior to this trip, we had been considering several possible areas for relocation after retirement. Well, the mysterious magic of the mountains ended that search. It wasn’t long before we went to a realtor, told her what we wanted and the price we were willing to pay, and she found exactly what we wanted in the town of Covington, Virginia. The town boasts a population of around 6,000 and approximately 100 churches (smile).

In 2005 we moved to Covington and began basking in the peace and tranquilly it offered. Not long after, we joined the First Baptist Church, where I was invited to play piano at the Sunday morning service. I accompany the Reverend Evelyn Harvey Spurlock, who is 96 years old.

Reverend Spurlock is also a member of the church’s unique group called the Plus 90 Club. Other members include, Mrs. Cleo Williams (92); Mrs. Roberta Mack (93); Mrs. Florence Clinton-Simpson (95); and Mama Sue Payne (99). Our pastor, Reverend William Hickman once asked to join the club, but my mom (Mrs. Florence Clinton-Simpson; who also migrated to Covington after visiting me) told him, “Only when you turn 90.”

The group offers support, continued involvement, and new experiences to its members, but only after you have reached age 90. While I have many years to go before that milestone, I too have always been an active person. So after settling into my new home, I called the League of Older Americans to inquire about their program schedule. I was referred to the local senior center, where director Patrice Coles sent me a calendar and helped me become a member at the center. At the time I was 55 and the youngest one there. We did arts and crafts, and I sometimes played the piano. Members attended nutrition class, had blood pressure readings, and, most importantly, made new friends. I opted out of playing bridge (smile), but its available for those who want it.

On the calendar from the senior center, I noticed a line dance class was being offered twice a week, so I joined and met more friends. My dance teacher, Mrs. Barbara Perdue, has been teaching for some 17 years and is 74 years young. The oldest in this class of 15 participants is 80 years old.

One of the students in my dance class invited me to join a Tuesday morning bowling league. I gladly accepted the invitation, and now I’m a rookie on a team surrounded by experienced bowlers—all of whom are senior citizens.

I may not be the best bowler, but I keep my spirits high because the captain says it is all about having a good time.

Not long ago some of the members in my dance class asked me to get a red hat and a purple hat and join the Red Hatters. Once a month a group of ladies, mostly 55 and older, meet. Every time they get together, the ladies all wear a red hat, except on our birthday. That's when we wear the purple hat. What do we do? We eat, socialize, eat some more, and sometimes go on a trip. Our motto is "Live, Laugh, and Love."

So, "How old is old?" and what is it in Covington, Virginia, that promotes longevity? I believe it's all about keeping physically fit, mentally active, and living stress free. Covington is a place that promotes that. Everybody waves and everyone is friendly and helpful. It's a city that wherever you go, that place becomes an opportunity to socialize—the post office, grocery store, or even Curves to name a few. Families are close knit and many residents were born here, raised their families here, and retired

here. The town is like a big family, and everyone knows and cares about everybody else.

When someone dies, traffic stops in all directions to honor the bereaved family. Often businesses close to allow employees to attend funerals, and they sometimes show up wearing their uniforms. Churches support each other and the community with activities and food for the needy. We have one elementary school, one middle school, one high school, and many residents are over the age of 55.

In Covington there are many and varied opportunities to volunteer, including within the church, at the Arts and Crafts Center, as a B.&O Railroad Greeter, reading stories in the library to young children, performing in Noon Day Concerts, and playing in The Alleghany Orchestra, which consists mostly of retirees.

Furthermore, a visit to the emergency room at the hospital does not mean a long wait. We seldom hear police sirens, because no one is in the way. Horns don't blare because of slow commuters; the speed limit is 35 mph and there is no traffic.

Entertainment comes in a variety of forms that include outdoor festivals, fairs, parades, concerts, baseball games, golf, and the annual antique car show that closes Main Street every year. Covington is unapologetic about its slow, southern pace. We love living here and take pleasure in responding to the comment "You are too old" with, "How old is Old?"

At a birthday party for one of the Plus 90 members, who was turning 99, one of the party goers, also in her 90s, got up to leave the table. As she did, she looked back at her girlfriends and said, "Don't do anything I wouldn't do." Then she smiled and walked away.

So really, "How old is old?" ❖



Herbrette Clinton Richardson is a retired music teacher of 33 years, pianist, and an active worker in her church and community. She is married to Norman A. Richardson of Baltimore, MD and they have only one son, Dante' Richardson, M.D.



# Covington, Virginia

**N**estled in what is now known as Alleghany County, Covington, Virginia, might well qualify as a "Blue Zone." Just west of Lexington and near the border of West Virginia, Covington was once a vast frontier land where hunters from the Shawnees, Susquehannocks, and Iroquois nations would roam in search of elk, buffalo, deer, bear, puma, and wolf. Yet like all wilderness areas of what would eventually be the eastern United States, this changed with the advance of white settlers to the area in the 1740s.

Progress went slowly for that area of Virginia, however, because it would be another 70 years before lots for a full-scale settlement would go on sale. In 1817 the town was christened Covington, after Brigadier General Leonard Covington, a War of 1812 hero. The general was mortally wounded while fighting King George's troops on November 11, 1813, during the Battle of Chryslers Field in Canada.

Not long after Covington was founded, Alleghany County was formed out of tracts of land absorbed from Botetourt, Bath, and Monroe Counties. Covington, an agricultural community, grew slowly, with only 43 houses on two streets by 1855. That would all change in the 1890s, when the first industries arrived. The Covington Iron Furnace began operation in 1891, followed by Deford Tannery, then E.M. Nettleton mill, and the Covington Machine Shops. Two flour mills, two brick yards, and the Alleghany Pin and Bracket Company further enhanced the economic boom. As a result, Covington's population jumped from 704 in 1890 to 2,950 in just ten years.

Covington continued to attract industrial enterprises, and in 1902 the municipality was designated the county seat of Alleghany County. Fifty years later the town grew into a city, and by 2008, according to the census of that year, the population had swelled to 6,120. Covington is big enough to offer a variety of services and culture, yet remains small enough to charm.

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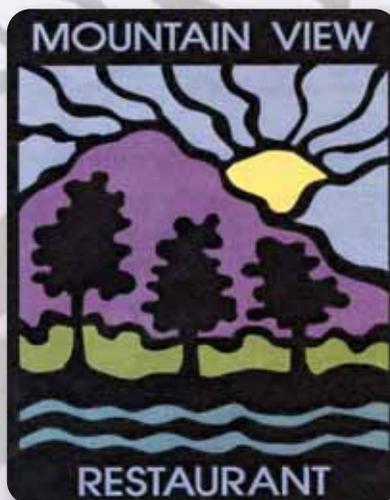
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