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Woman celebrates 110th birthday

Jocelyne Hudson-Brown, Special to the Register

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HAMDEN — Having aged with the grace and beauty of a rare gem, Daisy Barnes celebrated her 110th birthday on Friday.

Cake, candles, balloons, flowers, a television appearance and many good wishes were among the highlights of her special celebration.

Earlier in the week, she was even given a cake when she went to the Hospital of Saint Raphael for a "routine" blood transfusion because of anemia.

"I am happy for so many compliments," Barnes said.

Born in Nova Scotia on Aug. 8, 1893, to an African father and a mother of German and Scottish descent, her family escaped the ravages of slavery because the ship carrying her father to the United States veered off course and wrecked on a cove in Halifax.

As an adult, Barnes immigrated to the United States, spending a few years in White Plains, N.Y., where she was instrumental in establishing the first branch of the NAACP.

She settled in New Haven some 62 years ago. A seamstress by trade, she has lived through the administrations of 20 U.S. presidents, whom she describes as "some good, some bad."

Granddaughter Dawn Barros and her family, all of New Haven, were right by Barnes' side for her special day.

"Nan means so much to our family," Barros said. "Our mom died when we were young and she just took over. She was good for us, me and my brother."

Barnes became a widow in 1947 and never remarried. She has outlived everyone in her immediate family, including her two children. She has five grandchildren, nine great-grandchildren and four great-great-grandchildren.

A resident of Arden House Harborside Healthcare, Barnes is the oldest client in the 360-patient facility.

"She only came here in February at 109 years old," said Barros. "We tried to keep her at home for as long as we could."

Evelyn Vetro, an Arden House spokeswoman, said, "It is wonderful for somebody to be that age and respond appropriately. Her family adores her; she enjoys their company and socializing. She is remarkably alert and very aware of the world around her."

On life in the 21st century Barnes laments, "Modern technology is too much. I think people should go for a more simpler way, it's better."

Longtime friend Bernice Stokes, herself a spry 88-year-old, said, "She doesn't miss much. We've had some great times together; we've been very close for a long time. She is a lovely lady who has lived a nice life."

When asked how she spends her days, Barnes said, "Sitting up thinking, reminiscing; sometimes I get a little tired." With that she smiled and said, "Well that's enough (questions) for now."

Long a member of St. Luke's Episcopal Church in New Haven, Barnes will attend and be honored in a special service at 10 a.m. Sunday.

According to the Gerontology Research Group's Web site (www.grg.org), there are 46



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"validated living supercentenarians" in the world, 21 in the United States, with two more close to being validated.

Since Barnes just reached the age of being a "supercentenarian" Friday, she isn't among that number.

"It is an explosion, just an explosion" of extremely old people, said Leonid A. Gavrilov, post-doctoral research associate at the Center on Aging at the University of Chicago. "The fastest-growing population is the oldest olds," which he defined as 85 and older.

"Of course it is good that they survive, but they are almost always widows so it creates, problems. They definitely need some assistance."

People are living older for several reasons, said Gavrilov, a native of Moscow. Air conditioning saves the frail elderly from dying in the summer heat and vitamins added to food keep people healthy who otherwise would have trouble absorbing those nutrients.

While seemingly simplistic, antiseptic cleaners and screens make a big difference to people with compromised immune systems, Gavrilov said.

"In the past, when everything was dirty and there were flies ... old people's environment was hostile to them. They are like AIDS patients."

Jocelyne Hudson-Brown is a Register intern. Metro Editor Ed Stannard contributed to this story.

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