

Everyday Women of Sitka: Grace Katasse Larson



- Can you please tell me a little about yourself? How long have you lived in Sitka? What types of things are you involved in here?

My name is Grace Katasse Larson, and actually I am pushing 80. I have a family of four boys and two girls. The girls are salt and pepper. The younger one is salt and the older one is pepper. My four boys are all grown up and have families except William. I have the tendency of calling them by their nicknames because when they were in trouble their full names came out. My children's

names are Carl Larson Jr., Becky Larson, Henry (Munch) Larson, William Larson, Carlene Larson, and Andy Larson. I was married on May 2, 1959 to my husband, Carl Larson Sr.

I came to Sitka in 1948. My dad was a fisherman. He was a highliner on the Prince of Wales. My mother had 15 children. She had two sets of twins, and one twin the brother died. In the first batch of twins, the girl died. We moved here in '48 from Wrangell so I know Southeast pretty well. In Wrangell, we stayed 3.5 miles out near the institute. My dad would come home and all our boots would be lined up at the door way. Where we lived, we could see the tide getting low. My dad would say "tomorrow is low tide, our table will be set". We had mussels, urchins, and different kind of clams. We lived off the land and sea with so many children. We stayed there for quite some time, and then moved here. My dad retired from fishing, and worked at Edgcumbe school as a janitor. My mom never worked in her life. She had all the children to raise and make sure we were well fed and everything. My mom would make fresh bread every two days. She passed on to her children how to make homemade fry bread. We went out on our own. The other children left, but I stayed here in Sitka. Ever since then, I have been making fried bread, biscuits, and bread at home. We lived off beans. We had our own garden. I think we had so many beans, I never want to see a bean again.

Anyway, as the years went on, I worked at Mount Edgcumbe in the kitchen area. And then I went to housekeeping. And then I went into nursing. In '56 or '57 I saw this tall handsome guy with a brown leather jacket. He was so handsome. I get tickled. We never talked. He stayed in another area of Mount Edgcumbe. He worked in nursing. So when I worked in nursing, I worked in physical therapy, then I worked in central supply, and then I worked nursing on the floors. At SEARCH, there were three to four beds to a room with pregnant mothers. SEARHC had a real small radio station. So I though well, I can send songs to my secret admirer. We finally started talking around '58. Not really talking because my mom and dad were old fashion. In '59 my husband and I got married. He was my one and only. I had all my children, and two miscarriages. Our oldest daughter only lived a day and a half. My husband and I loved children. He worked in orthopedic. A large area of SEARCH was full of orthopedic children.

I made bread. I learned to make Easter Bread. My husband's mother was Aleut and his dad was from Denmark. So I made fresh homemade bread all the time as the kids were growing up. There was never a dull moment for the kids. They grew up well fed. They learned well. As the years went by, I made fry bread. My daughter is a cashier. She used to cook at Lane Seven. In 2000, she had an aneurism behind her eye. I cared for her. My husband passed away in 2007. He had heart problems and diabetes. As the years went by, in the late '50s and early '60s I made fry bread here and there. I had watched my mom do it. People ask if I would sell my recipe. I say well follow Betty Crocket white bread, but I am not related to her. On the 4th of July, once I start I don't look around. I just concentrate because I have two big stoves going. I sell it in front of the theater, and there were two lines of people that ended by Shee Atika. I used to cook from 10-2, but now I put from 10-sold out. I also help at the end of July with the Fire Department. They get the main ingredients and condiments, and I do the rest. When I sell it, I have homemade rhubarb syrup and homemade raspberry jam. I started in 2002. The money they make go towards the firemen fund for people that need it. The people at my booth on the

4th will be sad that I ran out before they could get some. I tell them to come at the end of the month at the fire hall. I used to stand and talk, but not anymore. I started at the fire hall because my oldest son was a fire chief for the Southeast Village of Hoonah. In Hoonah, I did fry bread there and helped with the fire department. He was a fire chief and EMT wilderness. He left Hoonah and went on to Juneau in the gold mines. Every once in a while, I will break down and buy a place to sell from.

Since I am not working anymore, I am my daughter's left side, and she is my right side. We care for each other.

- What is your biggest struggle right now?

My biggest struggle is trying to keep up with my rent. When I used to work, I worked two jobs. I worked at the girl's dorm at Mt. Edgecumbe. I made them fresh bread, soup, and hot chocolate with biscuits in the winter time. I worked on the boy's side too. With 7 brothers and my 4 sons, I was used to working with boys. One time one of the boys said "Mama Larson, I need an extra bread". I found out they were handing them out the window to their girlfriends. Back to my biggest struggle, trying to keep up with my rent. For the past two or three months, we have been doing medical. We have a television but I don't want to disconnect it because it is our entertainment for the evenings. I used to have a car, but I sold it some time ago. I have our phones because the doctors get ahold of us from Anchorage or here. The utilities are going up. I struggle to get by. It is a big struggle with the cost of living.

- What makes you proud to be a woman?

Seven children and two girls, and my husband. When he passed, he was buried in the Russian Cemetery. I was happy about that.

- Who was/is a female role model for you? Why?

My role model is my mother. I learned a lot from her. She was the best teacher, and she showed us how to survive. And she taught us how to live off the land and sea with my dad. They were the best teachers.

- Why do you think you were nominated to be featured on our Facebook?

I have no idea who nominated me, but I would like to thank the person face to face. In 2008, I was nominated Woman of the Year. My nominee was Sharon McIndoo. I was shocked. I was happy, I was proud, I was a proud mom walking around. In 2007 my husband passed. 2008 was a good year because of my nomination. One of my happy moments was that my children and grandchildren came from Anchorage, Juneau, and Oregon. It was really nice. My grandson, Olaf, escorted me up. He looked just like his grandpa. That was a special time. In fact, I don't think I ever cried when I lost my husband. If I did, I don't remember. It made me feel like I am not alone in this world, they know I am here.

- What does a normal “day in the life” look like for you?

Having worked two jobs, I am glad I am home. But I wish I was with my husband. My daughter and I look after each other. I wish I was working. I want to volunteer, but I want my spare time. I used to work at a store. I would go to work 10-3 and then 3-midnight at the dorms. That was back in the '80s. Now we stay up late to 1 or 3 in the morning. We watch our television programs, sleep in, and cook whenever I want to. Just being home, and kicking back. I really don't kick back that much. I do a lot of sewing alternations. I used to do wedding cakes. My other daughter used to calligraphy names on the cakes.

- Do you have something you'd like to say to other women in Sitka?

To the other women, keep your goals at a pace. If you lose your other half, you have your children and grandchildren to look up to. And stay in your culture.

- What does being a strong woman mean to you?

To have positive mind, positive for your children and grandchildren. Setting their goals. To be always there for them. They don't always know it. Just be with your children.