



TOO BUSY FOR THE ELDERLY?

By Beverly Beckham, Boston Globe

"They're all so busy." That's what she says whenever I ask about her family.

She insists that they aren't ignoring her, that they're busy with work and school and friends and shopping and sports and meetings. That's why she doesn't see them often. She understands. She's not complaining.

She used to be busy, too. Her door always open, people coming and going, the phone ringing, then more people stopping by. It was a whirlwind for 20, 30, 40 years, and she was at the center, in the kitchen cooking, baking, the teapot always warm. She was a joiner, too. She belonged to church and civic groups.

She got old so gradually, she didn't see it coming. Her kids grew up. Her husband died. Then her sister, her brother, friends, more friends. The phone rang less. Fewer people stopped by, and they didn't have time for tea. She made new friends, joined other groups, went out for lunches and on trips she didn't take when she was young and raising her family.

But this was old age part one. Now she's in old age part two, and it's hard because she lives alone and can't get around the way she used to.

She refuses to ask for help of any kind. So, if the kitchen light burns out, she eats in the dark. And if she runs out of milk on Monday, she drinks black tea until Thursday, when her groceries arrive.

She has grandchildren and they drive, but why would they want to come visit an old lady when they could be out with their friends? There isn't self-pity in her tone when she asks this. Or anger. Or disappointment. Everyone has so much to do, she repeats. But

she acknowledges that there are days when the only voices she hears are on TV and that sometimes, on these days, she feels alone.

In another town, in another conversation, a different grandmother is angry that her son never stops by. "Tell him how you feel," I say. But she can't. She thinks he should know. "I never see him. He has no time for me."

She saw him every day when his children were young. He needed her then, to meet their school bus, to drive them to their friends, to cook their dinner, to be with them when he and his wife couldn't be.

Now she needs him and his family, but they don't include her. They go out to dinner and to the movies and they don't say, "Why don't you come with us?"

I say, "Maybe they don't know you want to come."

"I don't," she tells me. "I just want to be asked."

I think about my own grandmother and how there were many times I could have asked her to come with me somewhere, to the store, for a ride, to pick up my father, and didn't—didn't even think to. Why not? I'd stop by on the fly, on the way to somewhere else, and she'd open the door and have her arms around me before I got inside, smiling, fussing, doting on me.

"Sit down. Sit down. I'll make some tea. Do you want a cookie? Have you had lunch?"

"I can't stay, Nana. I have to..."

What? What did I have to do that was more important than spending a little time with this woman who loved me?

People who love you don't come along every day. That's what children and grandchildren need to remember. And people who love you aren't guaranteed to stick around forever. One day they may not be there opening the door, smiling at the sight of you.