Mary Immac honors 106-year-old's life of service

Former Glendale resident Mary Bihl worked as hospital's X-ray technician for more than 50 years

BY IVAN PEREIRA

So what's the secret to a long and rich life? Good genes? Healthy diet? Exercise?

According to friends of Mary Bihl, who turned 106 last week, the answer is hard work and a little radioactivity.

Longtime friends and colleagues gathered at the Monsignor Fitzpatrick Pavilion for Skilled Nursing Care at Mary Immaculate Hospital last Thursday to celebrate Bihl's decades of dedication to the community. Bihl, who has never married and has no children, worked as an X-ray technician at the hospital from 1920 to 1975.

"It was beautiful," Bihl said of the party, which featured music, games and cake.

Although she is confined to a wheelchair and has slight trouble hearing, the nursing home's administrators said the former Glendale resident is the most active and friendly of their 112 residents. In addition to volunteering her time to take care of the center's pet dog, Valentina, Bihl keeps her mind sharp by completing daily word search puzzles.

"I do it to pass the time away," she said.

Bihl was born in Hartford, Conn. in 1902. Her family moved to Brooklyn a few months later. When she was 18 and looking for a steady job, she was recruited by Sister Suthbertha of the Dominican Order to work as a nurse at Mary Immaculate. Bihl said after a few weeks she decided to pursue a different career at the hospital, one that no one else at the time really wanted.

"No one would go [to the X-ray] because people were afraid they were going to get cancer. I wasn't afraid," she said.

Bihl's fearlessness of the then-complicated technology made her one of the hospital's most revered workers. Not only did she spend countless hours helping doctors shoot X-rays for their patients, but she did so without ever wearing protective gear.

"I wouldn't wear it because it was too heavy," she said. "I wanted to make sure I was fast enough in case someone moved or fell."

Former co-worker and longtime friend Bertha Funk said Bihl would stay overtime on several nights helping doctors and nurses at the Catholic hospital with their patients, at times refusing to look at a watch and clock in.

"She really helped the hospital come up and had a very good relationship with the nuns here," said Funk, who has flown from her native Germany to Queens for the past six years to celebrate her friend's birthday.

Bihl said she had never advised another technician to risk possible radiation contamination, but Funk, who still refers to her as Ms. Bihl, thinks that may have been the key to her longevity.

"I think the X-ray preserved her. Everything we eat is radiated these days to make it last longer," she said.

After Bihl retired in 1975, she continued to live an active life in her community, constantly going to church, where she volunteered. She was on her way to church in Glendale seven years ago when she had a fall and broke her leg and was admitted to Monsignor Fitzpatrick, according to Theresa Morale, the nursing home's director of therapeutic recreation.

Despite the injuries, Bihl, the oldest resident at the home, still found ways to give back, including watching the center's pets.

Photo by Cat Cutillo

Mary Bihl, who turned 106 last week, smiles with her furriest friend, Valentina, at Mary Immaculate Hospital.