

## ***Donna Elam: Older Should be Bolder, Sing Like No One is Listening***



*Donna Elam was born in Santa Monica, California, the only child of Ardis Schulte Elam and Willis Blake Elam. She is the mother of one son, Daniel, and the proud grandmother of two grandsons. We met Donna while she was at work in a clothing and art shop in downtown Ojai, California. She agreed to meet us when she got off work.*

Donna Elam has overcome many difficult experiences in her life, but the most difficult was ending a 17 year marriage. “It was a marriage that was never good from the start, but never-the-less I kept trying and trying,” she said, “And finally I think I had help.”

Donna said she and her husband were looking to remodel their home and decided, before they put too much money into it, to look around at other homes. “I found a house that I fell in love with and I went to the open house so many times that the realtor said, ‘You’ve got to find a way to get this house.’ So I brought my mother over and she fell in love with it too, so she said she would help us get it. I was married at the time and I was so excited. I was packing boxes and I kept talking to my husband, let’s get going.”

About two weeks before move in time, Donna said her dearest friend asked her for help. “She needed me to help move her mother into a rest home. She knew that if I was there her mother would be on her best behavior. I knew I was going to be back four days before the move and I had done all the packing of everything I could do, so I said, I’m going. My husband was very unhappy that I would put the needs of my friend before his needs, but never-the-less I went. And while I was there I got more insane calls from him and I realized, with the help of my friend, that this was my chance to leave if I was ever going to. If I had to move into the house, then it would be really difficult, so this was my chance now. And it has been a wonderful five years. I have blossomed. I have grown. It has been wonderful. I am so grateful, so grateful.”

Donna said it is her wonderful circle of friends that have supported her through her difficult times. “And also journaling and reading, and just faith. I found a positive attitude is so important. I have always thought that, even as a child I realized that those people who were in concentration camps in World War II, how did they survive. Obviously it shows that attitude is everything.”

For Donna, proud moments come in many ways, and sometimes even in seemingly silly ones. “I got up and sang in front of a bunch of people for the first time recently. I remembered a card with a saying that said, ‘Dance like no one is looking, sing like no one is listening and live life like it is heaven on earth.’ And I did that. I told myself that I was not going to go into that silly panic, stage fright thing. I was going to act like we were in the garage singing and having a good time and it worked - it worked. It was pretty amazing because I was a very, very shy child growing up.”

“Of course having my son graduate from college, finishing my two year stint in the Peace Corps, and even though it isn’t anything I did, it was still a pretty exciting and proud moment when my grandsons were born. And I guess I am proud that I did make that break and left that marriage.”

Donna said she is happy every day that she can have a good attitude. “I work with the public and a lot of times women will come in. I sell art clothing and I love talking to them about not being afraid to show yourself. I remember listening to a program, like a monologue on late night TV one night, and an older black woman, I wish I knew who it was, said something that stuck with me and I use it all the time. I don’t claim that I came up with it, but I use it all the time and I love to pass it on; and it’s ‘Older should be bolder. Older should be bolder.’”

Now that she is older, Donna said she realized that “keeping up with the Joneses, having that little tract home and the Lennox china - that’s not important to me now. I like those things, don’t get me wrong, but connection with people, just keeping your own integrity - those things are really important to me now.”

As a young person growing up, Donna said she was fairly sheltered. It took traveling to Europe when she was in her 20s to open her eyes to all the ways people live in the world.

“I remember sitting in my rocking chair when I was little, and looking at the globe. I remember thinking, ‘Oh that’s my home, not just Long Beach, not just California. Oh, that is my home. It was something preparing me for later on and I really feel that way now.’”

Donna said when she was in the Peace Corps in Ecuador, she and a friend got a hold of a book by Krishna Murti. “We used to read and discuss it. When I got back home I

showed it to my mom and she said, 'Oh, Krishna Murti lives right here, right behind you.' Her family had moved to Ojai, California and lived literally right behind the property where the famous Indian philosopher lived. "I got to hear him speak a couple times and I did literally walk from my mom's place to the meadow where he spoke. That was pretty cool."

The most important advice Donna has for the next generation of women is, "to take care of and respect yourself. Moderation and respect. I think we can go for a long time if we take care of ourselves. Don't let anybody put you down and have respect for yourself as you would have respect for others."

"And be comfortable with your body. Oh my God, if we only realized that we really are beautiful in all the variety that we are. I am sorry that we have these silly images that we have to live up to. Respecting yourself and appreciating the gifts that we have been given - it's amazing. Live life to the full and ask for help."

For Donna, meditation has been an important and transformational key. "For the awakening of your own dreams, I would say meditate. Sit and be still and listen to your inner voice. It is very important to be still, calm and centered and to listen. Relax. Listen to your inner voice. Listen to what is tweaking you - something will be coming to you so pay attention to your intuition. It isn't easy and it takes practice, but the wisdom of the ages is coming down. It is right inside of you."

## *We Honor the Earth*

*"We are Indian people. We have warriors. We have our people that we pray to. We have our lodges. We have our circles. We have the four directions that teach us the way it was taught to me. We are Chumash people. We are people of the western gate. We are the caretakers of the western gate. That is why our pole is black, for we are caretakers of that. And the south, they teach us it is the blood of our people and it is the site of the children and we take care of our children. And there is the white. There is the knowledge of our elders that is hidden inside of them, those stories. The ones with the white hair, the ones that carry the wisdom, the wisdom keepers. And then the sun in the east that teaches us to go out in the morning and embrace her and ask her to give us the energy to survive one more day. The beginning of life, the beginning of a new day. And then we honor the earth that is beneath us, for we are going to go back to the earth. And we honor the cloud people and the clouds that roam. And we honor the sun and the moon and the stars all over, for they take care of us. And we honor all that is around us on the earth for we are part of everything. We are only here for a while, and I am so happy to the ancestors that they showed me this way, that they embraced me, that they loved me enough to give me the gift of life."*

*—Adelina Alva-Padilla*

