

## **Mildred Keith Stark: Education, Reading, Expanding Your Mind and Never Giving Up**

*Mildred Keith Stark was born Nov. 3, 1922 in Chicago, Illinois, to Toby and Benjamin Keith. She is the mother of two daughters – one of whom is the author - and grandmother to five granddaughters. She was the middle child of five children born to her immigrant parents.*



Millie Stark's life has been punctuated with tragedy. As a 17-year-old, she was in an auto accident while traveling with two teen-aged boys from her home in Chicago to visit her sister in Indiana. "I was sitting in the middle in the front seat in a brand new car. My mother hadn't wanted me to go, but I went anyway. I don't remember anything about the accident, but I was in a coma for three weeks and every bone in my body was broken. What else do you want to know?"

Millie had applied to a college in Illinois at the time, but the accident and subsequent years of recovery changed her life's direction. While the boys were thrown from the car and not injured, Millie went through the windshield. Her injuries were so severe that the doctors at the small town hospital where the accident occurred had virtually given her up for dead. Millie had glass from the windshield in her brain, severe internal injuries, the bones in her legs and arms were broken and her feet were severely crushed.

"By the time my mother arrived in Indiana, gangrene had set in my arms. But my mother insisted that I be treated. She had me brought back to Chicago and wouldn't give up. She insisted that I would live."

The year was 1939, and the surgery performed to remove the glass from her brain was so experimental, that the doctors who performed it never placed a plate over the portion of her skull that was removed. To this day Millie has a "soft spot" where the bone should be. "My mother was a sensational woman. She wouldn't give up. I owe her my life twice."

Three weeks after the accident, Millie remembers waking up from her coma in a hospital room and answering the telephone. Millie not only recovered from her injuries enough to walk again, but she went on to attend night school, work, marry, have two children and do everything in life the experts had said were probably impossible. And though she still suffers more than 70 years later from pain associated with her injuries, Millie pushed pain aside and never gave up experiencing life.

Millie's mother and father came to the United States from Lithuania and Latvia, respectively, and met in Chicago. The couple opened a small grocery store and butcher shop on the city's south side. Millie described her father as incredibly hard working and kind. "My father never let anyone go out of his store hungry. He was a reader. His greatest joy was to go to the park on the few days a year he closed the store, and read a book or a newspaper."

One of Millie's loves throughout her life has also been the love of books. "I love to read. My most important piece of advice to young women would be to expand their minds. They should read all the time. I don't think the world will survive without the minds of women."

Her parents raised five children during the Depression in apartments attached to their store. "My parents put in a false floor in part of the apartment, but the rest was concrete. My sister Shirley and I had the front bedroom. My brother and my sister, who was an infant, had a bed near the kitchen. My other brother slept in the hallway. We had 100 pound sacks of potatoes next to the piano in the hall. We all worked in the store after school. I never told anyone where I lived. I guess I was embarrassed. I used to have a lot of dates, but I would have them pick me up from a friend's house."

"My mother never learned to read or write, but she was a great lady. I don't have her strength. She could do anything. She was so smart that in her later life she used to advise my brother, who was a successful attorney. She could have been President of the United States if she had had the opportunity."

Not long after she recovered from her accident, Millie was struck with another tragedy. Her father was shot during a robbery in his store. Millie said she was the last person to see her father alive. "And I lost my sister, who was three and one-half years older than me. She died at 28 having her second child. I miss her to this day."

Millie went on to work as a proof reader at the Atomic Energy Commission. "I read manuscripts that the scientists wrote and would proof read them." It was during the Second World War and many of the manuscripts Millie read were classified documents associated with the work being done there to build an atomic bomb.

Like some of the women of her generation, Millie had a few engagements to boys who went off to war. "I didn't really want to marry them, but I wanted them to have someone to come back for."

But it was her marriage to her husband, Leonard Stark that brought Millie's life the greatest joy and the greatest meaning. "He loved people. He was very bright and had a photographic memory. We went to Europe many times and had a wonderful life together. What I want people to remember about me, is how happy I was with my husband for 50 years, and how much I miss him."

## ***Expand Your Mind***

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