

# A3 LOCAL NEWS

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## MOM'S THE WORD

### Centenarian credits staying active with long life

Verleaner Dixon is 100 years and 6 months old and she can tell you the key to life.

But first, a piano lesson. Wheelchair cozied up to a Suzuki portable keyboard, both hands poised over the blacks and whites, Dixon coaxes a flow of music from the console.

The longtime Pasadena resident finishes a chord and turns to her teacher: "How'm I doin'?" she asks, all easy Southern charm.

Jonathan Langager, 41, a screenwriter and di-



Anissa Rivera  
Columnist

rector, met Dixon at her 100th birthday party in May. Langager moved to the Garfield Heights neighborhood of Pasadena in 2021. Dixon has lived there for 37 years.

"At the birthday party, I introduced myself and said, 'I heard you want to learn how to play the piano,' to which she responded: 'Are you gonna teach me?' The rest is history," Langager said. "As she likes to say, 'Ask and it shall be given!'"

So every Wednesday for

**RIVERA » PAGE 14**



PHOTO COURTESY OF JONATHAN LANGAGER

Centenarian Verleaner Dixon is learning to play the piano at 100 and making a friend of her piano instructor.

## Rivera

FROM PAGE 3

the past five months, Langager walks a couple of blocks to Dixon's 112-year-old Craftsman to give her piano lessons.

At first, Langager said the sessions required lifting his student out of her wheelchair, up onto a raised platform, and onto the piano bench. But after he put the ask out on social media, Andrea Knox of Toluca Lake agreed to loan out her spare keyboard as long as the two needed it.

"Now all we have to do is wheel her up to the keyboard," he said. "No more lifting. Ask and it shall be given."

He is proud to report his prize pupil works hard, and has mastered "Hot Cross Buns." Although, Dixon herself admits, "I can practice a bit more."

"Learning piano at any age is a challenge, but she's up for it," Langager said. "The fact that she's learning piano at one hundred years is just incredible on so many levels. Her age means that it's a steep learning curve. But she pushes through it. She has the courage to throw herself into learning."

The learning includes some history in between music lessons, too.

Dixon was born in 1922 and grew up on a farm in Mississippi, the only girl among 5 boys.

"We raised what we ate, we picked cotton and grew corn," she said. "We hunted, and I could chop wood with an ax. My mama always said, if you have one pair of socks, wash it every night and hang it up to dry and you can wear a fresh pair the



Centenarian Verleaner Dixon is learning to play the piano at 100 and making a friend of her piano instructor. "If he's bothering with me, he has to be good," she said.

COURTESY OF JONATHAN LANGAGER

next day. (Even if you don't have much you can be clean.")

After two brief marriages, Dixon moved to Duarte in 1962, then to Los Angeles before buying her first home in Pasadena on Douglas Street in 1977. She purchased her home on Marengo Avenue in 1985.

By then, she was working as a caseworker for the L.A. County Department of Social Services, attending Victory Bible Church in Pasadena, and volunteering at Jackie Robinson Center.

She also became a foster mother to more than 100 children, many of whom still visit and call, adding to her tribe of nieces, nephews, and grand-

children. Dixon's backyard has been the site of many weddings and parties, too, said her niece Sheila Batice of Monrovia, whom Dixon calls "my Sheila."

"She's gone through so much and she only gets stronger and more motivated," she said. "She did it all her own. She's resilient."

For his part, Langager said there's so much to admire about his student. "She's generous, open and connected to others," he said. "She's like a mother to all kinds of people. As I've taught Ms. Dixon piano, she has taught me so much more about life and love, gratitude and belief. Every week she reminds me, 'When you wake up in the

morning, say 'I am blessed!' For someone steeped in the cynicism and self-pity of our time, this can be a foreign concept. But if she can learn her scales at 100, I can learn gratitude at 41."

Now, Langager can list his blessings as easily as Dixon plays. "I'm grateful for my health, my ability to do all the things I love to do (making art of all kinds), and for all the people I care about—my girlfriend, my family, and my friends. Oh, and my cats (Gwendolyn and Luna). I'm grateful for my cats."

Their musical connection is a high note in a life full of tempos good and bad, 100 years of making the best of things, Dixon said.

"I'm amazed to be living to be 100," she said. "I always say, love people and trust God. I wanted to learn how to play the piano, and then this nice young man came along. Life is what you make it."

Anissa V. Rivera's column "Mom's the Word" appears in the Pasadena Star-News, San Gabriel Valley Tribune, Whittier Daily News, Azusa Herald, Glendora Press, West Covina Highlander and San Dimas/La Verne Highlander. Reach her at Southern California News Group, 605 E. Huntington Drive, Suite 100, Monrovia, CA 91016 or by calling 626-497-4869.