

LifeBio of the Month – Mary Coombs

Grandmother and granddaughter connect long distance to discover each other with the help of LifeBio

J.D. Whitman discovered the life of an amazing person, her own grandmother, when she began a school project using LifeBio.com.

Every Sunday for about five months, 17-year-old J.D. called 83-year-old Mary Katherine O’Grady Coombs on the telephone because their homes are separated by hundred of miles—from western to eastern Pennsylvania. They also spent a week together working on the project. Using the more than 250 questions available at LifeBio.com as a guide, J.D. began typing her grandmother’s life story into LifeBio’s web template. Here are excerpts from Mary Coombs’ 83-page, hardcover LifeBio Book.



Describe your childhood home, inside and outside.

I lived four houses down from St. Michael's Church (in Greenville, PA) until I was a freshman in high school. I remember there was a built in seat in front of a big window. My mother had all kinds of plants and ferns on the seat. She could always make plants grow. We had a screen porch and in the summer when it was really hot we slept on the porch. I loved the fact that we could go home for lunch everyday. It was also across the street from my friend Katie’s house. Mine was #59 and hers was #50. The organist would always say, “Run down and get Tinky O’Grady (that’s me) to sing mass.” Especially the 7:30 mass because everyone skipped it. When the boys got married, my mother said the house was too big and we moved to 15 Morgan Street. The house was smaller and a longer walk to school but I cut through the alley.



How would you describe your mother to someone who had never met her?

My mother was an excellent piano player. She played without ever having a lesson. I remember her sitting down at the piano and suddenly the house was full of music. I especially loved to hear her play the Midnight Fire Alarm. I don't know what moved faster her fingers or her feet pumping the pedals. She played for the silent movies and later for the many musicals in the town. She also helped with the high school plays and Father James' musicals. My mother could also bake the best pies. Her meringue was at least three inches high. She also made homemade noodles. She used to roll the dough and cut it into strings. The long noodles were hung on the back of the kitchen chairs and across the kitchen table.



Another memory that I have is of my mother always feeding the poor. The bums or hobos would jump off the train below St. Michaels Church and make a beeline for our backdoor. I never figured out how they all knew where to come to. Word must travel fast on the train lines because there were always new faces at suppertime for my mother's hot meals.

What is the greatest invention that has come along in your lifetime so far? Why was this invention important to you?

The invention of the telephone was important to me because it made it easy to keep in touch with my mother on a daily basis, Later, it was important to stay in touch with my children as they moved to their own homes.

Have you found true love?

Describe what true love means to you. I was married to Dale for 51 years. I knew I would marry him right away. Dale was special because he made me feel special. He treated my mother with respect and acted like she was his mother. My Aunt Marie introduced me to Dale when he came to Greenville to work as a carpenter. He came to build the Army barracks at the beginning of World War II. Aunt Marie rented a room to Dale and a friend of his.

What happened on the day you were engaged?

When I graduated from high school in 1943, engagement rings were not possible for teenagers. So Dale bought me a hope chest made of cedar and we made plans for the future. Today, over 60 years later, the chest is filled to the brim with memorabilia such as baptismal and first communion garb, a marriage license, my will, insurance policies and keepsakes.



Describe your wedding day.

We were married on April 10, 1944 at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. Lt. Father Murphy, a marine chaplain married us at St. Francis Chapel. My mother, my best friend, Kathleen Leehan, and Dale's friend, Sgt. Joe Murphy, made up our group. The weather in North Carolina was beautiful. I remember the cherry blossoms were in full bloom and the moon was huge.

My dress was orchid and very simple. It was made with a flowered top. Kathleen wore navy and white as my attendant. Of course, Dale and Murphy were in uniform.

After the wedding, we all went to a dining room on the base. We all went to a movie and drove mom and Kathleen to the bus trip home. I stayed in North Carolina until Dale received his orders to ship out.

What advice would you give to future generations about marriage?

I believe the secret is learning to share. Always be honest and don't be afraid to ask each other for advice. It is important to respect each others' needs.

What was your first "real" job?

I went to work for the disposition camp at Camp Reynolds during World War II. (Note: Camp Reynolds was in operation from 1942-1945 as a personnel replacement depot in Transfer, PA for troops being sent to Europe. During that time, over one million troops passed through the camp.)

Do you have a motto that you live by?

My motto is to mind my own business, especially with my family. I raised my children the way I thought I should and they should be free to do the same.

Do you have a best friend?

Kathleen has been my friend my entire life. I think this is something very rare and special. We have shared so many happy and sad times together. Happy times through school and being friends our whole life. The sad times began with the deaths of our fathers through the deaths of our husbands. She is still my best friend.



Mary's book dedication

I lived in a different era. It was a time of small town America. Now a lost era – gone forever to modern suburbia and busy careers. My childhood days of simple pleasures: mom's homemade cookies cooling on the windowsill attracting neighborhood children, harmless hobos stopping for a meal, a church that was respected, roller skating, ice skating and swimming with friends has been replaced with racing to sporting events, fast food, and acquaintances instead of lifelong friends. Yet even now I hope I have instilled the values of that lost era--the values of family, friends, and God that make life worth living.

The family's reaction to Mary's LifeBio:

Linda Whitman, Mary's daughter, had this to say about the LifeBio experience: "It was special and very beneficial in connecting my mother and my daughter."

J.D. Whitman, Mary's granddaughter, had this to say about the LifeBio experience: "I realized that my grandmother wasn't always an older woman. She was Mary Katharine O'Grady Coombs--the incredible wife of Dale Coombs, the loving mother of three children, and one of the first independent working women in her hometown."

LifeBio's reaction:

"Mary's story is America's story. She captures her life through much of the 20th Century. We walk down the streets with her, meet her neighbors and her friends, and see how history affected her along the way," said Beth Sanders, founder and CEO of LifeBio.com. "In her own words, she has invited us into her everyday life, but what we learn from her life is far from ordinary. Mary is an extraordinary person and now her **granddaughter knows that is true. Their relationship has changed in a remarkable way.**"