

At 107, this artist just beat covid-19. It was the second pandemic she survived.



Artist Marilee Shapiro Asher in her D.C. studio right before her 103rd birthday in 2015. (Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)

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Marilee Shapiro Asher works in twos: two husbands, two children. And now, two pandemics. The autumn morning almost five years ago when I walked into Marilee’s D.C. studio, I knew I was meeting a force. This wasn’t doilies-and-kittens, old-lady art. I was trying to keep up with a centenarian using a walker who whisked me through her working studio filled with hacksaws, handsaws, hot wax knives, plaster, steel and bronze.

Marilee — you get one-name status when your art’s in the Smithsonian permanent collection — turned 107 last year, and I was looking forward to going to another one of her shows in May, to see what she’s been up to since we last met. The novel [coronavirus](#) canceled that show. And then it threatened Marilee. But Marilee is a force, remember, and she’s been here before. Yes, that’s right. This incredible woman — artist, author, photographer, sculptor, therapist, mother, wife — conquered the 1918 flu pandemic, when she was 6 years old.

Marilee remembered little about the illness beyond the moment she knew it was over, said her cousin, Linda Hansell, who helped write Marilee’s autobiography, “[Dancing in the Wonder For 102 Years.](#)”

“When she was better,” Hansell said, she remembered that she “came downstairs and saw her father eating breakfast.

“And she knew she was better, rejoining the family at breakfast.”



Marilee Shapiro Asher had a show scheduled for her artwork in May before she tested positive for the coronavirus. (Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)

This time, Marilee had been feeling poorly for weeks, Hansell said.

She began feeling fatigued in March, and it worsened in April, just as the virus began tearing through the region and hitting the elderly in particular. When Marilee stopped eating, the nurse at the Chevy Chase House, her senior living community, insisted that she go to the hospital.

There, doctors confirmed the dreaded news — Marilee tested positive and wasn't doing well. She never went on a ventilator, but doctors called her daughter, Joan Shapiro, to tell her she should get to the hospital. They believed she had no more than 12 hours to live.

“Well, he doesn't know my mother, does he?” Joan Shapiro told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

Marilee went home after five days in the hospital. And she is still recovering, beginning to read the paper and comment on the news. But it's a long, slow process, Hansell said.

Marilee wants to return to her art.

That's how she does it, her family said. The art, the work, the passion, the vibrant engagement and curiosity is what's propelling her toward 108.

It's what she told me in 2015, when I met her in the studio and asked that requisite question for centenarians, “What's your secret?”

The 100-year milestone was the rising trend in world population studies. America has more than doubled its centenarian population in three decades, with about 72,000 today.



The artist holds the wax model for casting her piece Guard Dog Big in 2015. (Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)

There are about half a million centenarians in the world, and [Pew Research](#) and the United Nations predict that number will rise to 3.7 million by 2050. The coronavirus, which hits the elderly particularly hard, threatens to flatten that particular curve.

Marilee isn't having it. She never has, even before she was born.

Her mother tried to abort her by drinking castor oil in 1912 because "a proper Victorian woman didn't have children in her forties," she [wrote in her autobiography](#).

Marilee has lived fully for her family, which she describes as "the center, the interest, the worry, the pleasure, the 'raison d'être' of my life," in her autobiography.

When we talked about that part a little more, she said her longevity came down to being selfish. And exercise.

She had been doing tai chi every day for decades and added yoga to the routine. And she always worked, even when her children were young and other women didn't work.

"I had to be selfish in order to keep making art," she said.

For five years, I've worried a little about the way I wrote that. Because "selfish" isn't really what we call it when men do it, right?

I'm sure Marilee may have heard that word often — "selfish" — and probably battled it for many years, as she continued to produce and create.

She had her first show in Chicago in 1938, and her work was sold in Washington galleries for decades. She was on staff at American University and spent years as an art therapist at the National Institute of Mental Health.

But it wasn't "selfish," what she did. She shared her talent and skill with many throughout her life.

She simply never let her artistic self be stifled by all the other selves expected of women. And her ability to pivot, adapt and evolve has something to do with her vibrant longevity.

In her late 80s, when it became challenging to work with large, heavy bronze sculptures, Marilee didn't retire. She found a new, more nimble medium: digital. She enrolled in a Corcoran School of the Arts and Design class on digital photography at 88, in a classroom full of students seven decades younger.

Her prints were everywhere when I visited her studio. She was on a photography binge, experimenting with color.

"I've always been afraid of color," she said. "So I'm working on that right now."

Five years later, her digital prints — photographs and drawings manipulated and enhanced on her computer — are vibrant and brilliant, colorful and gorgeous.

Marilee is a force, always growing, always moving forward. I can't wait to see what else she plans to share with the world.



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Petula is a columnist for The Post's local team who writes about homeless shelters, gun control, high heels, high school choirs, the politics of parenting, jails, abortion clinics, mayors, modern families, strip clubs and gas prices, among other things. Before coming to The Post, she covered social issues, crime and courts.