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Henry Williams receives Portsmouth's Boston Post Cane

Given to town's seniormost citizen



Christine Hochkeppel

Henry Williams receives his Boston Post Cane on Sunday.

By Bruce Burdett

PORTSMOUTH — In the 100th anniversary year of the Boston Post Cane tradition, Portsmouth resident Henry Williams became the town's 20th recipient in a presentation ceremony at his Oakland Farms home on Sunday. The cane is given to the town's seniormost resident.

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There with the 95-year-old Mr. Williams for the occasion was his wife of 68 years, Marion (Bence) Williams, 91, and representatives of four generations of Williams family members. Town Council President Peter McIntyre did the honors for Portsmouth.

With several neighbors on hand, Mr. Williams was saluted not only with the cane but with cake and an official Portsmouth tile.

He said a bit of the credit for his longevity may be due to his never touching a drop of liquor. But the real reason, he believes, is being surrounded by wonderful family. "I don't need anything else," he said, adding that he wouldn't at all mind spending another 25 or 30 years with his wife.

A Newport native who also lived in Middletown, Mr. Williams has been a Portsmouth resident since 1985. He served in the Navy during World War II.

A skilled woodworker, Mr. Williams worked for the late Aquidneck Island house builder Merral Holt and then was a carpenter for the Department of Public Works at the Melville Fuel Depot in Portsmouth until his retirement in 1972. After that he drove school buses for Laidlaw.

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Since then, he has focused on his daily mission — “His day is not complete until he has found some good thing to do to help someone,” said his daughter Cheryl Brawner, also of Portsmouth. “He loves to help people out so it has been a bit frustrating for him recently when medical issues have made that difficult.”

The Williams have two children, Ms. Brawner and a son, Robert Williams of Hendersonville, N.C., five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Ms. Brawner said that her father is very proud of his cane. Although he needs to use a walker to get around, “on Sunday he used his walker but carried his cane.”

Later Sunday afternoon, others in the family went out to pick up a pizza. “When we got back he was sitting in a chair reading his proclamation. He was really quite touched by the honor.”

The cane tradition got its start in 1909 when the publisher of the former Boston Post newspaper handed out the ebony black canes with gold heads to towns throughout New England for presentation to the oldest resident.

Portsmouth’s first recipient that year was Peleg Coggeshall. The most recent cane holder before Mr. Williams was Barbara Ramsbottom who passed away in September at age 105.

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