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When family is more than just family

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NCR Today

My Uncle Lou turned 93 years old this week. He's pretty amazing: Lou still gets around, still drives and lives on his own quite well. A few days ago, I discovered his secret.

I knew family was a large part of what kept him going -- but I didn't really know what "family" meant. My uncle has a son who lives nearby and visits every night on his way home from work. His grandchildren come by often, too, and bring their children along.

But my understanding of family opened up when I met Lou for lunch.

He climbed into my car with my wife and our two daughters. With a big smile on his face, he pointed the way to a small Italian deli about a mile from his apartment.

We know this place. It's run by a man named Giovanni, from the southern Italian town of Bari. He met my uncle 40 years ago, when he first opened his deli in the neighborhood. They share a love of food and horse racing (in that order), and have been thick friends ever since.

Here's how it goes when my uncle takes us to Giovanni's place: We sit down at one of the three tables he jams into the front corner of the store. My wife says, "Please, just bring us a couple of prosciutto sandwiches and a salad -- we'll be fine." Giovanni and his wife nod, smile and begin a high-mass procession of dishes: salad, pasta, sausage and peppers, meatballs, pizza, eggplant parmesan, calzone, cannoli, espresso and a bottle of red wine. Then he doesn't let us pay, so we have to sneak some money into the tip jar by the counter as we leave.

Lou drives here every day. On his own, he'll sometimes sit in the back by the pizza oven, or watch as Giovanni makes sausages and tosses salads. Otherwise, he's up front at one of the tables, a part of the

scenery.

As we ate with him though, I realized it was more.

The Mexican lady who helps behind the counter came out to give him a hug; they traded words in Spanish and Italian. A German man named Helmut sat next to us and poured himself some wine; every morning, he shares cappuccino and pastry with my uncle. Giovanni's sons and his mother sit and talk to Lou, too -- and when four policemen walked in for lunch, they (naturally) knew my uncle.

Lou doesn't say a word. I don't mean he is shy or taciturn. I mean he can't speak: He lost his voice to throat cancer more than 15 years ago. And yet, in this small place, his days are filled with conversation and friendship. The people standing and sitting around us as our table buckled under the weight of more food were his extended family.

They keep him going. They keep him away from the American senior stereotype: lonely and alone, the TV or radio the only sound to fill the void.

My uncle has a very devoted family -- nothing can replace that. But, to keep life vital, it may take something more.

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Maybe it takes a village, even if that village is an Italian deli you've gone to every day for the last 40 years.

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