

YOU ARE NEVER TOO OLD

To Be A LEADER

Eldon Newcomb may not be the oldest member of Optimist International, nor the longest serving member of an Optimist Club, but he could well be the oldest serving Club President. Eldon, the current president of the Breakfast Optimist Club of Madison, Wisconsin is 96 years young.

The rewards of volunteering, the value of serving others and the special joy in helping youth became obvious to Eldon while still in his own youth. He was an Eagle Scout who demonstrated outstanding leadership skills at youth camps and summer programs in his native Missouri.

Eldon joined the Optimists in 2010 at the tender age of 91. He immediately got involved in Club activities supporting youth in the Madison area. He has rung bells for the Salvation Army, secured numerous speakers for weekly Optimist meetings and joined our judging team for field events at Special Olympics. One of his special joys has been volunteering as a tutor for middle school kids who are behind grade level in reading. He is not at all afraid of vigorous physical activities – he has helped the past two years as the Club installed over 1,000 seat cushions and chair backs at the University of Wisconsin football stadium as a fund raising project.

When asked what caused him to join the Club at this stage in his life, he noted that: “I had the free time, was drawn by the appeal of the philosophy and the upbeat spirit of the members.” He has come to truly enjoy: “the camaraderie, good spirit and can-do attitude of his Club.”

As one might expect, his optimism is based in part on a keen sense of humor. When he was approached in 2012 about taking on the position of Club Vice President which normally leads to being Club President in two years, he responded he would be glad to serve, but noting his age and said that “You guys are really optimists!”



A native of Kansas City MO, he graduated from the University of Missouri – Columbia (Phi Beta Kappa) with a degree in Botany. He served in the US Army during World War II doing malaria survey work in the Middle East and Africa. Following the war, he earned Masters and PHD degrees from the University of Wisconsin. He and his wife Joy decided to stay on in Madison where they raised a son and two daughters. Eldon joined the faculty of the University of Wisconsin and went on to be a distinguished professor of Botany. He was chairman of the Botany Department from 1984-88. He retired as Professor Emeritus in 1990. He received many accolades throughout his career for his research in cell biology. A special focus of his studies involved using electron microscopy to discover new organelles in plant cells, particularly those involved in cell wall synthesis, and using electron-opaque staining to characterize the enzymatic activities of these organelles. Quite a mouthful, but you would never guess the depth of his genius just by observing his warm smile, and the gracious manner in which he interacts with everyone he meets.

When asked how he manages to have the energy and stamina of a man much younger, he notes emphatically: **“I don’t feel my age. I simply feel the same level of energy as those much younger than I am.” We should all be so blessed.**