

LIFE AND DEATH

Go with gusto

Planning for death, author says, helps us 'live bodaciously and finish well'

By Claudia Feldman

Margie Jenkins startled the staff at her cardiologist's office the other day.

When the nurse asked if she had any special messages for the doctor, the 92-year-old Jenkins said yes.

"I want to talk about dying," she said. "I want to talk about the end of my life."

"Well, you almost turned my nurse into a basket case," the heart specialist said when he stepped into the examining room. "But I wish more people could be as direct as you."

It wasn't a foreign topic for Jenkins. The social worker and psychotherapist has spent the past 30 years coaching people of all ages to plan for death and dying.

"At some point life ends," Jenkins says from her home in west Houston. "I'd like it to be a culmination and celebration of a wonderful life rather than a scary interruption and surprise."

Following her own advice, Jenkins has made sure her will is in tip-top shape. She's put her financial and insurance files in order. She's visited funeral homes to compare the prices for services offered, and she and her husband of 69 years, Robert "Jenks" Jenkins, have settled on bargain rate cremations.

"Why bury money?" she asks.

She's also talked to her four children about her most precious possessions, among them an old family Bible, so they can claim their favorite items. And she's explained to them what medical intervention she wants—and doesn't want—when her health inevitably fails.

"The idea is to live bodaciously and finish well," Jenkins says.

After her book, "You Only Die Once: Preparing for the End of Life With Grace and Gusto," was published a dozen years ago, she and Jenks gave

seminars across the country. She focused on emotions; he spoke to organization and logic. Next she wrote a workbook, a step-by step, fill-in-the-blanks guide. An online video course is in production, and she easily swings into therapist mode, though technically, she retired last year.

Ever the realist, she thought it was time.

"I tire easily. I'm not as sharp as I used to be, and I don't remember as well as I should," Jenkins says. "It's important to recognize the changes but to live life to the fullest and maintain a sense of humor."

She says that with respect. After hearing hundreds of clients talk about the deaths of loved ones, she still feels their pain.

Life experience

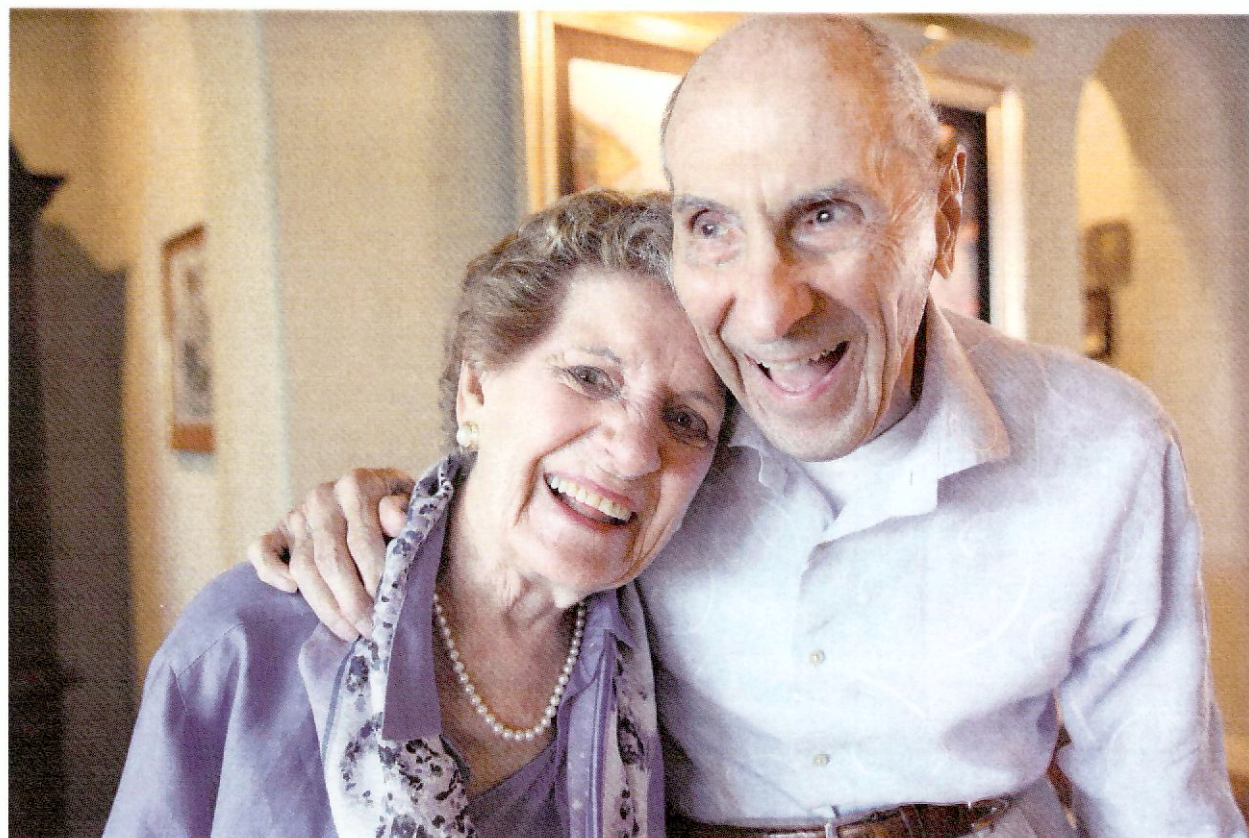
The diminutive Jenkins grew up in Kentucky and met the love of her life in Latin class. She and Jenks were only 15. They didn't learn much Latin.

They married in 1946, a year after both graduated from the University of Cincinnati. As they hop-scotched across the country in pursuit of his career—he earned his MBA, then worked as an oil-company executive—she taught everything from health education to chocolate-chip cookie baking, then quit to take care of their growing family.

"I always wanted four kids and a lot of puppies," she says. "We had two girls, two boys, and at one point, 13 German shepherd puppies."

At 50, as their youngest child sailed off to college, Jenkins decided it was time to go back to school herself. She wanted a master's degree in social work, but the admissions staff at the University of Houston wasn't at all sure an older female student could make it. They asked her to take a trial course and see if she could handle the work.

The class, as it turned out, was



Elizabeth Conley / Houston Chronicle

Margie Jenkins, with her husband, Robert "Jenks" Jenkins, both 92, is creating a companion online course to her book about dying.

"At some point life ends. I'd like it to be a culmination and celebration of a wonderful life rather than a scary interruption and surprise."

Margie Jenkins

human sexuality. Jenkins thought at the time, "Well, I can pass that."

When she made an A, one of her daughters sent her a dollar.

After graduation and a stint at an interfaith counseling center, Jenkins was 60 when she went into private practice and began focusing on death and dying.

"It used to be that you couldn't talk about sex or money. Then death became the last taboo."

Right away, Jenkins noticed how many people thought her new area of expertise had nothing to do with them.

Death touches people of all ages, she told them. "I don't think we should wait until kids go on their first date to talk about sex. In the same way, we shouldn't wait until someone is on his or her deathbed to talk about dying."

Among Jenkins' dislikes are the high prices charged by many funeral homes. Families in pain are in no position to comparison shop. That's why, she jokes, individuals reflecting on their own endings should take it upon themselves to do just that. "Shop before you drop," she says, and be wary of packages that include unneeded extras.

Jenkins still remembers when her grandfather was laid out in the family parlor, and people brought flowers picked from their own gardens. During a children's game of chase, she carefully placed her root-beer lollipop under his satin pillow.

"I knew it would be safe,"

Jenkins says. "I wish I had put one in for Grandma."

Video course

Jenkins' online course (find it at youonlydieonce.org) should be available to the public in January or February. The man who made it possible is Dean Truitt, who met the couple on a cruise last year.

Truitt recalls, "She asked me what I did, and I have a nonprofit that supports and distributes primarily

Tips for living

Margie Jenkins says filling in these blanks is a springboard to bodacious living:

- Activities that interest me
- People I want to spend more time with
- Trips I want to take
- Ways I could make myself more lovable
- Some things I want to let go of

» Find more at chron.com/bodacious.

Christian oriented materials to churches. And when I described the process, she said, 'You're just the person I'm looking for.'"

"She had a sense of urgency," Truitt says. "She wanted to make sure her life's work was on a platform that wouldn't go with her."

The video course includes not only elements of Jenkins' book but her philosophy about life. Therapist P. K. Loeffler is testing it with a church group, and she says members find the coursework freeing and a ticket to live bodaciously, as Jenkins likes to say.

For people of all ages, that means taking an important trip, going back to school, re-establishing old ties, maybe even dating.

"The point is we just never know when we're going to die," Loeffler says. "You can live more freely if you've already made some of these decisions and told your loved ones about them."

The Jenkinses have followed her advice at home, a one-story house with hallways and doors wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs, should they ever need them. Grab bars and phones are in every bathroom, in case of trouble. And, for the bodacious part, the back patio faces a lovely, man-made lake.

In the late afternoon, she and Jenks say, it's a perfect spot for wine and cheese.

claudia.feldman@chron.com

Jenkins: Don't wait to talk about wishes



Elizabeth Conley / Houston Chronicle

Margie and Robert "Jenks" Jenkins hoist a glass on their patio, where they spend many evenings watching the sun set. At the time of your own personal sunset, have your house in order, she says.