



# Cortland County Area Agency on Aging

County Office Building

60 Central Avenue

Cortland, NY 13045-2746

Phone: (607) 753-5060 ● FAX: (607) 758-5528

E-mail: [ccaaa@cortland-co.org](mailto:ccaaa@cortland-co.org)

Website: [www.aging.cortland-co.org](http://www.aging.cortland-co.org)

**Elizabeth Haskins**

Director

## Surviving Hardships, from War to COVID

by Matthew Kemak, Aging Services Specialist

“Keep pressing on, don’t quit.” Clear advice given by Ken Coleman, 92, of Cortland. Ken reflected on his time growing up from 1927 to 2020, “I was never a quitter, I not the person to give up, so my advice is to not quit no matter what.” His hardest hardship? “Finding a job,” said Ken.

COVID-19 has changed a lot for the WWII veteran, Quartermaster-US ARMY, but his willingness to keep going has kept him strong. “I never dreamed I would live this long,” said Coleman as he is currently homebound due to the current pandemic. The hardest part of the whole pandemic, is “missing my visitors.” Ken enjoys seeing people and said that is what he misses the most.

Coleman originally hails from Elmira, NY, grew up with his parents and 10 brothers and 5 sisters. He recalls hardships when he was younger, from when he was a toddler burning his hands on the oven, to a preschooler accidentally getting ran over by a truck. “I was on the running board and fell off and the truck kept going. I musta’ been like 4 or 5 at the time. Ended up in a cast from my back to my arm.”

Ken’s experience with any type of pandemic was previously felt with Polio when he was 15 years old. “When we moved to our place in Endicott, our neighbor kids had the Polio. We just weren’t allowed to go near the house.” Ken added that he never had or was asked to ever wear a mask during that time.

Being born in 1927, Ken grew up also not knowing anything about the Spanish Flu that hit roughly a decade earlier. Brenda Sweeney, his daughter said, “It goes to show how quickly something like this (COVID) can come up, but also interesting how quickly it was forgot. I don’t expect it to not be forgotten this time around, 20 years from now.”

Coleman said his biggest hardship was finding a job out of the war. He had multiple short time jobs until getting married and moving to Cortland, where he worked for Overhead Door for 12-15 years. He then worked for Carrier, Brockway, and retired at Carrier at 58 years old. His favorite job was his retirement job at the Byrne gas station(now Walgreens) where he filled car tanks up.

The biggest hardship Ken had to endure was looking for a job after his service in WWII. Ken was about 24 when he was released from service, and holding just his 8th grade diploma, had harder times finding jobs. Ken talked about how he worked for Thatcher Glass in Elmira before the war, then after the war it took some time to come back to that, working at Artistic Cards for

“about a year.” He then got offered a job at Corning Glass, where “I lost about 30 lbs in a month and decided to find something else.”

Ken then decided to try Ford Motor Company in Buffalo, with a few of his friends, where he lasted 6 months. “They (Ford) decided to bring in displaced Europeans from the war, and split 33,000 people to be trained in the local plants. It was train them for our jobs or quit,” said Ken. He asked around and found construction jobs for a few years after that.

It took him until he was 34 and married before he moved to Cortland in 1954 and got a job with the Overhead Door Company where he worked for the next 12-15 years. Together with his wife Rita, they raised two daughters, Brenda and Nancy. Soon Ken was on the move again, Ken was working for Carrier, then Brockway, and back to Carrier after Brockway closed down. Ken retired at Carrier due to health at 58 years old, but picked up a part time job at the Byrne/Atlantic (Arco) gas station where Walgreens is today. Brenda said she never seen her dad the happiest, than working at the gas station. “Dad is a people person, and he got to know everyone and they him working there.”

Ken said that the COVID-19 Pandemic is one of the hardest things he has faced, just because, “there is so much unknown and I am old now, so I am at home most of the time.” He added, “My daughter keeps me here and protected. Used to go shopping in the store to walk around more, but now I stay in the car just to get out. That was my exercise.”

Ken now enjoys listening to audio books to spend his time, and that he hasn't watched news since mid April, because it all is “too much and confusing.” He added, “I like being home and love my Meals on Wheels because it makes it easier to keep going.”

“Faith gives us hope,” said Ken addressing the current situation. “I pray every night and it helps me to keep going.” Ken will turn 93 soon.