

## **Abstract**

LONGLEY, LINDA RACKLEY. "Age Ain't Nuttin' But a Number: The Personal Meaning Systems of Senior Women Adult Cheerleaders. (Under the direction of Stanley B. Baker.)

Current statistics indicate that adults over the age of 85 now comprise the fastest growing age group in the nation. The graying of the planet significantly impacts the delivery of services within the medical and mental health communities. While increased health concerns are typically associated with increasing age, older adults have other needs beyond those of a medical nature. Historically, much of the geriatric literature has been written from the biological and medical perspectives, creating a deficiency model of aging. Less attention has been given to the psychosocial aspects of aging and what constitutes and contributes to psychological health in the older adult.

Ongoing gerontology research is needed to address the complexities of the aging experience, particularly those of a psychosocial nature, as the psychosocial issues often overshadow the physical aspects of aging. Loss of life purpose and boredom have been cited as the most damaging psychological threats to the elderly. Old age can challenge the previous perceptions of self and others, creating the need for revisions in the way an older self is experienced and how life in later adulthood is approached with meaning and purpose. Later-life depression has been associated with the loss of self-esteem, the loss of productivity, limited resources, and decreased options while psychological and physical well-being have been linked to a sense of life purpose and meaning.

The current study examined the lives of older athletes in order to learn more about the role of athletics in finding meaning and purpose in life, and how aging is experienced and viewed by the senior athlete. The research focused on senior cheerleaders, ages 69 to

77, and was based on interview data, observation data, and document analysis. The goal of the researcher was to better understand the phenomenon of personal meaning as it relates to perceptions of athletics in fulfilling purpose and meaning in later life, and how perceptions of aging are related to athletic activity in the lives of senior adult women.

Logotherapy (Frankl, 1978), the Evolving Self (Kegan, 1982), and Personal Construct Theory (Kelly, 1963) provided an appropriate theoretical framework for understanding the personal meaning systems of the senior cheerleaders and their perceptions of cheerleading and of aging. The three theories deal with personal meaning in terms of how individuals perceive themselves and their relationship to the external world around them. The study supports previous findings related to constituents of successful aging. These include activity, involvement, a positive attitude, caring and connectedness, a sense of purpose, humor, and self acceptance.

Seven common life themes were found across the lives of the 5 cheerleaders: family; tragedy; activity/involvement; commitment; personal beliefs; fun; and advocacy. While the pathways that led the senior women into cheerleading varied, the purposes for involvement were quite similar. Fun, acceptance, relaxation, and the opportunity to stay busy, active, and involved were offered as reasons for participation in cheerleading as senior adults. The study supported the role of athletics in finding meaning and purpose in life and has implications for teaching future generations of seniors the benefits of athletic participation at an early age. Further research with senior male athletics is recommended to explore the masculine perspective toward aging.

**“AGE AIN’T NUTTIN’ BUT A NUMBER”:  
THE PERSONAL MEANING SYSTEMS OF  
SENIOR WOMEN ADULT CHEERLEADERS**

by

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## **Biography**

The author was born and raised in Wilmington, North Carolina. She graduated from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington with a B.A. degree in Psychology in 1986. She received her M.S. degree in Rehabilitation Counseling and Vocational Evaluation from East Carolina University in 1987. She worked as a Prevention Education Specialist for the University of North Carolina at Wilmington and later as a substance abuse counselor at Cape Fear Substance Abuse Center in Wilmington. She obtained a M.A. Ed. in Counselor Education from East Carolina University in 1990. Since that time, she has worked with the Pender County School system as a school counselor. She was the first elementary counselor hired in Pender County. She has 14 years of experience as a school counselor, and has worked with students of all ages from pre-kindergarten to high school. She has worked in private practice on a part-time basis while employed as a school counselor. She has been a Licensed Professional Counselor for 12 years.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

Americans are living longer than ever thought possible. Current statistics indicate that adults over the age of 85 now comprise the fastest growing age group in the nation (Guttman, 2000.) It has been predicted that the number of Americans age 90 and older will increase from one million in 1999 to 10 million in the year 2050 (Cromie, 1999) while the number of centenarians will jump to eight hundred thousand (Snowden, 2001).

Addressing the needs of the senior population is not only a national concern but also a global one. The United Nations' World Assembly on Aging convened in the spring of 2002 to begin work on a global document that will guide policies for the rapidly graying planet. Such policies will address issues related to aging such as adequate pensions, affordable health care, and preventing discrimination and abuse. According to U. N. statistics, seniors will outnumber children for the first time in human history by the year 2050 (U. N. Open Session, 2002).

The graying of the planet significantly impacts the delivery of services within the medical and mental health communities. While significant advancements in modern technology and health care, along with heightened fitness enthusiasm, have contributed to increased life expectancy and quality of life for older adults, the physical, mental, social, and emotional changes associated with aging are challenging and, at times, as overwhelming for health care providers as for the senior consumers themselves. Few physicians and other health care professionals are adequately trained in the area of geriatrics; even fewer mental health practitioners have received specific training in

gerontology issues. Younger professionals often cannot relate to the peculiar needs of older adults and may feel uncomfortable and ill prepared to work with this growing population. Gerontology classes have become more popular in recent years, perhaps, in response to the increased longevity of senior adults and the seemingly complex aspects of aging.

While increased health concerns are typically associated with increasing age, older adults have other needs beyond those of a medical nature. Historically, much of the geriatric literature has been written from the biological and medical perspectives, creating a deficiency model of aging. Less attention has been given to the psychosocial aspects of aging and what constitutes and contributes to psychological health in the older adult. Aging studies suggest that psychological health in terms of relating to self and to others is frequently more of an issue with older adults than physical or economic difficulties. Loss of life purpose and boredom have been identified as the most damaging psychological threats to the elderly (Thompson, 1992).

As average life expectancy increases, individuals can expect to spend more time in mid to late adulthood than in any other period of life. Actress Lauren Hutton, upon reaching her sixth decade of life, claimed, "Sixty is the new thirty" (Sherrill, 2003). Aging baby boomers with increased levels of education, income, and health conscientiousness do not seem to fit the traditional, stereotypical image of the senile aging adult whose lifestyle is reclusive and past-oriented (Covey, 1993; Levy, 1999; Miller, Miller, McKibbin, & Pettys, 1999). Current aging models are moving away from solely looking at the physical aspects of aging, attempting to address the psychosocial

needs as well, to create a more holistic approach to aging.

Ongoing gerontology research is needed to address the complexities of the aging experience, particularly those of a psychosocial nature, as the psychosocial aspects of aging often overshadow the physiological. Continued studies in the field of geriatrics can contribute to the growing body of knowledge related to the aging process, increasing our understanding of factors related to longevity and improving the quality of life for individuals throughout the life span. Aging studies have repeatedly shown that past decisions and pathways can significantly impact the quality of life in later years. (Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, & Robinson, 1993; Botella & Feixas, 1993; Erikson; 1986; Lamme & Baars, 1993; Melia, 1999; Revere & Tobin, 1981; Snowden, 2001; Vaillant, 2002). As one octogenerarian put it, “As you live, so shall you die. If they (people) want to grow old gracefully, they better live gracefully” (Melia, 1999, p.185).

The way life is viewed and reviewed in terms of self and others continues to influence how aging is approached and experienced from a psychosocial perspective. Existing studies suggest that having a positive sense of self and finding purpose and meaning in life is associated with life satisfaction at any age (Reker, 1994; Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987). Old age can challenge previous perceptions of self and others, creating the need for revisions in the way an older self is experienced and how life in later adulthood is approached with meaning and purpose. Later-life depression has been associated with the loss of self-esteem, the loss of productivity, limited resources, and decreased options while mental and physical well-being have been linked to life purpose

and control (Reker, 1997). The current study examines the lives of older athletes to learn more about the role of athletics in finding meaning and purpose in life and how aging is experienced and viewed by the senior athlete.

#### Focus of Concern

Successful aging in terms of psychological well being has been associated with positive feelings and attitudes, a keen sense of self purpose, and connectedness to others (Barak & Rahtz, 1989; Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, & Robinson, 1999; Dittman-Kohli, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 1998; Melia, 1999; Reker, Peacock & Wong, 1987; Snowden, 2001; Vaillant, 2002). Learning more about psychological health in later adulthood not only can improve quality of life for the contemporary older adult, but can also provide valuable information for future generations. Understanding how older adults experience a sense of self and relatedness to the external world, and exploring how adults find meaning and purpose in later life is essential to professionals and lay people in adequately addressing the psychosocial needs of the elderly and providing preventive care, education, and support for individuals across the lifespan.

How well older adults are able to reconcile losses related to changes in work and relationships, as well as adapt to physical changes, seems to be associated with the ability to find meaning and purpose in their current situations and to view themselves and their relationships in a positive way. Successful aging is more related to having a positive attitude about aging than medical interventions or lifestyle (Vaillant, 2002).

The ability to adapt to age-related changes and situations is associated with the individual's personal meaning system in terms of relating to an older self, relating to others, and finding purposeful, meaningful ways to connect with the external world. Dittman-Kohli (1990) defined personal meaning system as "the pattern of valuations and concepts by which individuals represent to themselves what they believe and want in relation to their own life and self" (p. 281) and is a result of interpreting and understanding perceptions about "our current and general situation, about what is real and unreal, and what is possible" (p.281).

According to Dittman-Kohli, the personal meaning system is reorganized throughout an individual's lifespan but particularly in old age: The older adult faces "a gradual recognition of temporal limitations, diminishing opportunities, and the finitude of current life attainment." (1990, p. 282). Declining health, physical and biological deterioration changes the self and may diminish the external world to which the self relates.

Existing aging research has not yet exhausted the exploration of such issues in the context of the personal meaning system of the older adult. The following areas seem ripe for continued navigation: (a) strategies used by older adults in coping with changes in work, relationships, health, and mobility; (b) the impact of age-related changes on perceptions of self and others; (c) the influence of past decisions, choices, and lifestyle on current level of functioning; (d) coping with stereotypical attitudes toward aging; and (e) finding meaning and purpose in later life despite biological and relational changes.

### Significance of Studying Senior Athletes

Activity has been linked to psychological health in the post-retirement years. Seniors adjust more favorably to retirement when engaged in meaningful, purposeful activities and feel connected to the world around them (Longley, 2002). Contemporary senior adults are engaged in a diverse array of activities running the gamut of less strenuous pursuits such as reading or gardening to the more physically challenging arena of athletics.

Athletics is defined by Webster as “exercises, sports, or games engaged in by athletes” while an athlete is defined as “a person who is trained or skilled in exercises, sports, or games requiring physical strength, agility, or stamina.” The word athlete is actually derived from a Greek word meaning “to contend for a prize.”

The senior athlete was purposefully selected for the current qualitative study. Senior status is somewhat arbitrary depending on the persons or establishment initiating the rite of passage into older adulthood. The restaurant industry has been somewhat variable with respect to senior eligibility. Some eating establishments extend the privilege of receiving a senior discount or selecting from a senior menu with reduced prices to persons who are age 55 and older. Other restaurants reserve this privilege for those who are at least 60 years of age. With respect to church groups, members can attain senior status at age 50 and are thus entitled to partake of senior activities and trips and join groups with names such as Prime Timers or Silver Threads.

Most government agencies, such as county departments of aging, also recognize 50 as the age of seniorhood. While adults who are 50 years old may have access to their

local Senior Activities Center, there may be additional age requirements for athletic competition such as Senior Games. In the county and state in which the study with older athletes was conducted, the Senior Activities Center was open to adults 50 years old and older who wanted to participate in dance classes, exercise classes, strength training, and other special programming, but athletic competition leading to participation in the state finals was reserved for those individuals 55 and up. To be eligible for participation in the North Carolina Senior Games, the registrant has to be 55 by the application deadline. This requirement is strictly enforced: Picture ID's with birth dates are presented at the registration desk prior to entering the state competition. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the term *senior* is used to refer to any adult 55 years of age or older. The senior athlete, then, is any adult 55 years old or older who participates in athletics competitively for the purpose of winning a prize or receiving some other form of recognition.

What better arena in which to learn about adapting to physical and mental changes related to aging and coping with ageist attitudes than the domain of athletics. Athletic participation is generally atypically associated with senior lifestyles. The even greater atypical senior athlete is the senior cheerleader.

#### Focus of Interest

For the last several decades, cheerleading has been recognized as a sport and due to the physical prowess involved in performing cheering routines, rightfully so. According to Adams and Bettis (2003), the criteria for becoming a cheerleader has

“changed from popularity to the ability to execute demanding cheer routines, tumbling stunts, jumps, and dance moves” (p.49). While the sport of cheering has gained greater respect over the years, cheerleaders are still often viewed as glorified Hooters’ girls. Cheerleaders are typically viewed as physically attractive, slim, fit, and youthful, with abundant sex appeal. Such attributes generally do not come to mind when referring to seniors. What makes cheering a desirable sport for senior adults? How does the public respond to senior cheerleaders? For what and for whom do the seniors cheer? Why do seniors choose cheerleading as opposed to more traditional senior activities? What is the role of athletics in the life of the contemporary senior? How do senior athletes negotiate physical and biological changes and remain confident and competitive? How have past athletic interests and activities influenced the current level of athletic participation?

Answers to these questions regarding senior athletes offer an interesting perspective on aging and perceptions of aging. The current case study involving the Golden Pom-Pom Cheerleaders addresses the following psychosocial issues: perceptions of the older self and of others; accommodating age-related changes; general attitudes about aging; pathways to current athletic participation; and the role of athletics in finding meaning and purpose in later life.

### Research Questions

1. What are the personal constructs or personal meaning systems of senior athletes regarding aging?
2. What role does athletics play in finding meaning and fulfillment in older adulthood?

3. How are biological changes negotiated by the older athlete?
4. How are stereotypical attitudes regarding athletics and aging perceived by the senior athlete?
5. What pathways led to current athletic involvement?
6. What are the future goals and aspirations of the senior athlete?
7. How do senior athletes rate their overall satisfaction with life?

#### Research Limitations

The findings from this study only pertain to the five cheerleaders who participated in the study and should not be generalized to other senior adults, athletic or otherwise. The information gleaned from the interviews was subject to self-reporting bias. The transcribed interviews, archival documents, field observations, photos, and videos were analyzed and interpreted through the subjective lens of the researcher who has her own biases and worldview related to the aging experience.

## Chapter 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Traditional Models of Aging

Gerontologists have historically drawn from three theoretical perspectives in working with older adults. The least popular of the three has been Baum and Baum's disengagement theory (as cited in Parker, R. G., 1995) which proposes that older adults actually disengage from life in preparation for death. The elderly become less involved with society and spend their later years in recluse, reviewing their lives, and preparing for death. This theory has been criticized as being overly negative and somewhat ageist.

Disengagement theory is in direct contrast to Rank's notion of dichotomous acquired fears of life and death (as cited in Berman, 1994). According to Rank, the fear of death is characterized by self-preservation and in the emotional arena is associated with extinction or ceasing to exist. Human defense processes are established to ward off this fear, the most notable being that of *reversal* in which the organism works against its vulnerability by seeking to expand and perpetuate itself in the living experience. Rather than shrinking from life, individuals move toward greater life involvement. This striving to expand into the world is played out in facing the world on one's own unique terms, being a separate, unique individual, and making a mark. According to Rank's acquired fears analysis, the fear of life serves to keep the fear of death in check. Life is feared because it can devour one's sense of self, sap energies, take away self-control, and load one up with too many responsibilities. Humans seek to ward off the fear of life by becoming part of or merging with something bigger and more powerful than themselves.

The need to meet the world on one's own terms or to merge with something bigger than one's self may be fulfilled through creative expression, the legacy of children and grandchildren, relationships, or purposeful work and leisure.

Acquired fears analysis and disengagement theory approach the human experience from two distinct perspectives. Disengagement theory views old age more in terms of closure, pulling away from life and preparing for death. Rank's analysis places humans in a perpetual state of tension, trying to balance the fears of life and death, with the fear of life pushing toward stability and relatedness or attachment, and the fear of death driving toward expansion of life and individuation.

A second theoretical stance related to aging, and perhaps the most extensively applied, is grounded in Erikson's (1963) epigenetic model of psychosocial development. Erikson developed an eight stage model of the developing ego across the lifespan. The model depicts a series of developmental crises encountered by individuals from infancy to old age. The identity related crisis at one stage must be resolved before the issues of the next stage can be addressed. At each stage, the individual must achieve a balance between two opposing dispositions which Erikson termed *systonic* and *dystonic*. Each resolution brings about the psychosocial strength necessary to move to the next stage and the next crisis until the eighth and final stage is reached. According to Erikson, crisis is necessary for growth.

The first developmental crisis is encountered in infancy when the infant must balance a sense of trust with a sense of mistrust. In early childhood, the child is confronted with resolving a sense of autonomy with one of shame and doubt. The crisis

related tasks of the school age child involve reconciling initiative and guilt, industry and inferiority. The adolescent is faced with the crisis of identity versus identity confusion. As the individual approaches adulthood, the need for intimacy must be balanced with the need for isolation. Adulthood is the time for establishing family and work patterns and balancing generativity and stagnation. The ego-integrity stage is depicted as old age and is characterized by reflections on one's life and a search for balance between a sense of integrity and a sense of despair. Stage eight refers to the end of the life cycle and is seen as the culmination of the previous seven stages. Erikson devoted only a small portion of his model to mature adulthood as the model primarily focuses on infancy, childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood.

Those who embrace Erikson's model see reminiscence activities as a way that older adults can resolve despair issues and experience a sense of integrity in later life. Through reminiscing, individuals are able to reflect on past stages and experiences, resolve old issues, and perceive their lives as having significance and meaning. The major criticism of this approach to mature identity has to do with the notion of a true self or integrity suddenly crystallizing in old age (Parker, 1995). The eighth stage of ego-integrity speaks more to bringing closure to life rather than portraying older adults still actively engaged in the process of living.

According to Lamme and Baars (1993), Erikson holds to a *determinist* view of old age regarding the function of reminiscence activities, as opposed to a more *contextualist* approach. Life review theorist Robert Butler has also been placed in the determinist camp along with Erikson. Lamme and Baars support a contextualist model of adult

development which views the “interaction between the individual and his or her historical, social and cultural environment as the driving force behind his or her personal development” (p.302). The individual is seen as actively involved in his or her growth and development, rather than playing a more passive role as indicated by Butler and Erikson. Butler used the term life review to describe and to explain the manner in which the elderly deal with their personal histories. He saw life review behavior as the summation of one’s life in preparation for death and an automatic and necessary part of aging. Butler attributed late life depression to failed life reviews. The major criticism of the determinist approach deals with treating life review behavior as automatic and universal (Lamme & Baars, 1993).

Erikson himself realized a need to more completely address the psychosocial needs of older adults already in the ego-identity stage. As an octogenarian, Erikson (1986) published *Vital Involvement in Old Age* which chronicles many of the age-related issues experienced by the older adult. Based on information gleaned from his work with aging adults, Erikson discussed strategies for successful aging or vital involvement into late adulthood. Vital involvement has to do with involvement in the process of living and being connected to the world outside one’s self. Erikson saw those older adults who were engaged in meaningful, purposeful activities and relationships as being vitally involved in life. For some, their vital involvement stemmed from their relationships with grandchildren and adult children. For others, it was continued employment in the same or differing occupations. Many seniors chose to stay in the work force. Others replaced work with leisure, volunteer activities, and educational pursuits. Lifelong learning,

experimenting with new life styles, or exploring new activities were associated with vital involvement. Erikson found that taking responsibility to safeguard health and autonomy and having an adaptive attitude toward change were important elements of vital living during the aging years.

Erikson stressed the importance of adaptation at any age and particularly in old age. He stated that “the adaptation of individuals to the needs of the body, the community, and the environment in which they live is mandatory for survival” (p. 328). Conversely, maladaptation can impair development and *devitalize* the individual and, ultimately, the community. To Erikson (1986), adaptation of any living organism involves “accepting the place where it happens to be” [and] “adjusting (...) to the natural man-made forms and forces that are a part of it”(p. 328). Aging is a natural and inevitable force. According to Erikson, those individuals who can accept their changing bodies and relationships in a changing world, adjust their expectations and standards to those changes, and contribute to the generations following them are seen as vitally involved in old age.

Erikson considered adding a ninth stage to his life cycle model but opted against the revision, suggesting that older adults actually revisit earlier life stages in an attempt to resolve feelings of despair associated with previously unresolved issues. Erikson viewed aging in a circular fashion with individuals revisiting earlier stages and reintegrating in new age-appropriate ways the psychosocial themes encountered earlier in life. According to Erikson, the older adult “is challenged to draw on a life cycle more nearly completed than yet to be lived, to consolidate wisdom with which to live out the future, to place him

or herself in perspective among those generations now living, and to accept a place in an infinite historical progression” (p. 56).

A third theoretical framework for understanding the aging experience is centered around continuity theory (Ackley, 1989). Continuity theory serves as a model for working with older adults in the areas of reminiscence and life review activities.

Continuity theory suggests that, as individuals transition from one life stage to the next and encounter changes, they attempt to order and interpret change by recalling the past. These recall activities provide a means of preserving external and internal life structures. By linking past to present, individuals adapting to the experience of growing older “are motivated toward inner psychological continuity as well as outward continuity of social behavior” (p.521). Internal continuity has to do with maintaining a consistent sense of self and is identity-oriented. External continuity refers to external sources of support and understanding.

Continuity theory is grounded in the belief that adults in later life “will opt for familiarity and comfort over the unknown and potentially uncomfortable” (p.521). Attempts to maintain internal and external continuity are viewed by Ackley as “patterns of adaptation” (p.521). According to Ackley, reminiscence plays a valuable role in creating a sense of continuity for aging adults. While certainly more positive than disengagement theory, Ackley’s theory of continuity puts a great deal of emphasis on past events rather than what is currently going on with the older adult. The theory does not adequately explain the sense of adventure portrayed in the lives of retirees who

engage in various new leisure activities, travel to unfamiliar places, and explore new fields of educational endeavors (Longley, 2002).

Though used as theoretical tapestry in working with older populations, the theories previously discussed do not seem particularly growth oriented. Nor do they fully reflect the sense of renewal and reorganization of self linked to successful aging in gerontology literature. Rather than a period of stagnancy and orientation to the past, late adulthood is characterized as a time of continued growth and change and involves finding or creating ways of adapting to changes related to an older self.

#### Relevant Research

Much of the existing geriatric literature reflects a medical, deficit-oriented model of aging, focusing on the biological and physical aspects of aging, often ignoring or downplaying the psychosocial issues of aging adults. Over the last twenty to twenty-five years, the current trend in aging research has been to take a more holistic approach, attempting to address the psychological and sociological factors of aging, as well as those of a more physical nature. The following studies approached aging from an adaptive and holistic perspective, emphasizing the psychosocial issues related to successful aging and psychological health in the older adult. Successful aging has been characterized as *aging well*, *active aging*, *vital involvement*, *aging gracefully*, *creative aging*, and *feeling good*.

Rather than supporting the notion of old age as a fixed, stagnant point in the adult life cycle, these studies support the view of older adulthood as a time of continued growth and change. Part of the growth process is related to how older individuals view themselves and their current situations and how successful they are in adjusting to age-

related changes. Employing the adaptive strategies of *accommodation*, *assimilation*, *optimization*, and *compensation* has been associated with psychological health in later adulthood.

From the life stories of his informants, Thompson (1992) found evidence that the later adult years are a time of constant reconstruction. Those who were considered successful maximized their own personal qualities and experiences to combat physical and social handicaps. Thompson (1992) examined contemporary aging in the United Kingdom through life story interviews with 55 informants between the ages of 60 and 87. He found many different life threads running through the biographies, molding their individuality. The observed life threads were work, leisure, grandparenting, and intimate relationships.

Thompson relayed the story of Sadie, who at 86, was homebound and crippled by arthritis. It took Sadie “20 minutes to get her clothes on and she had to climb down the stairs backwards, yet with her constant knitting of creative toys and patterns for charity, she characterized old age as a time of contentment” (p.31). Then there was 80 year old Sarah whom Thompson reported as a heavy smoker with severe breathing problems and a cancer survivor. Despite her physical problems, Thompson characterized her as “a woman of energy and enthusiasm” (p.31) who had a passion for flower arranging. Another participant, Bill, was forced to retire from his hospital job at 65. Having been active all his life and refusing to hang out at the pub on the corner, Bill actively sought other types of employment. He became a van driver for five years, and then a milk driver for two more years until the company’s insurance carrier would no longer cover him due

to his age. Thompson saw Sadie, Sarah, and Bill as examples of seniors who were resourceful and adaptive. These older individuals found purpose and meaning in work and leisure activities despite age and health-related restrictions.

Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, and Robinson (1999) associated maintenance of self-esteem with successful aging while linking low self-esteem to late-life depression. They examined five cases from a longitudinal aging study and found evidence of assimilative and accommodative processes for managing self-esteem into the nineties. Assimilative processes refer to “self-correction and compensation, selection of enhancing environments, and self-verification” (p. 823) while accommodative processes involve “a rearrangement of priorities, devaluation of blocked goals, rescaling of self-evaluative criteria, and construction of palliative meanings” (p. 823). They referred to the case of Mr. Peck as a “striking example of persistent attempts at assimilation” (p. 836). He fought against his wife’s dementia until he was forced to put his wife in a long-term care facility, where she eventually died. His own health declining, he suffered unbearable pain following a hip replacement. He still went to great lengths to protect his independence and preserve his home, putting double chains on the doors and asking visitors to send a note reminding him of their visit. Eventually Mr. Peck had to have home health care to remain in his home. At one point, he was depressed and had low self-esteem. Three years later he was less depressed and his self-esteem had improved. His attitude toward his health problems was more resigned and he was gaining pleasure from daily activities, such as watching sports on television. Mr. Peck fought back from depression, apparently without medical help, and reasserted his previous goals of independent living and close

family ties. At the age of 90, Mr. Peck was still living at home but could no longer walk outdoors due to back and hip problems. He also had undergone three prostate surgeries. He was more prone to falling but worked out ways to get up on his feet again. He was more open to increasing his home health care. According to Coleman et. al, Mr. Peck was able to deal with his age-related difficulties through the adaptive processes of assimilation and accommodation, altering his perceptions and attitudes regarding his independence and acceptance of help.

Dittman-Kohli (1990) found evidence that older individuals create a more positive meaning of self than do their younger counterparts. In her study of 300 older adults (ages 60 to 90) and 300 younger participants (ages 15 to 35), she found age-related differences in responses on sentence-completion items related to fears, desires and goals, time perspective, and self-evaluation. The younger participants were more critical of themselves as evidenced by 206 negative responses in the younger group as compared to 58 negative responses in the older group. Dittman-Kohli concluded that older adults adjust to the negative aspects of aging by changing the content and standards of self and life evaluation, and that the age-related differences in cognitions suggest a reorganization of the personal meaning system in response to perceived environmental and biological changes.

Barak and Raltz (1999) found that perceptions of youth actually became stronger with increasing chronological age. Characteristics of youth identity in older adults were associated with life satisfaction, health consciousness, being socially active, and being adventuresome. Data were collected by a self-report survey mailed to a random sample of

older adults, aged 60 to 94. The response rate was 15 % with 773 usable surveys returned out of the 20,000 mailed; 668 of those returned were fully completed. Out of the 668 eligible respondents, 662 perceived themselves younger than their birth age. Perceived youth was determined by the use of a formula in which cognitive age is subtracted from chronological age and multiplied by 100. Barak's cognitive age scale was used to measure cognitive age in terms of age-role self concept. The youth measure contained the dimensions of feelings, looks, activity, and interests. The feeling-old measure was obtained by responses to the statement 'I feel old' across six levels of feeling-old.

The data analysis consisted of *t-tests*, Pearson Product Moment correlations, and multivariate analysis of variance. The results indicated a pattern of decline in perceived youth as feeling-old levels increase. The researchers also found a positive correlation between chronological age and perceived age but not between chronological age and feeling-old. There was, however, a positive association between cognitive age and feeling-old supporting the old adage, "You're as old as you feel." The study showed that older adults see themselves as vibrant, fit, and content with life despite their chronological ages, losses experienced, and physical conditions, supporting Dittman-Kohli's (1990) notion of a reorganization of the personal meaning system with respect to self and life evaluation.

Baltes and Carstensen (as cited in Freund & Baltes, 1998) developed a psychological model of successful aging known as SOC- Selective Optimization with Compensation. Key elements of the model include the dual processes of assimilation and

accommodation. The term selection encompasses two aspects of selecting: *elective selection* from “a pool of alternative developmental pathways” (Freund & Baltes, 1998, p. 531) while *loss-based selection* occurs “in response to a decline of resources or loss of previously available goal-relevant means” (p. 531). *Optimization* refers to the allocation and refinement of internal and/or external resources in order to achieve higher levels of functioning. *Compensation* is the use of substitutive processes to offset a loss of resources or decline in goal-related means. The SOC model provides a framework for understanding developmental change and resilience across the life span that can be particularly useful when working with older adults who may be encountering health issues and limited physical, financial, and social resources.

Freund and Baltes (1998) conducted an empirical investigation to validate the utility of the SOC model with an older population. They selected three subjective indicators of successful aging: subjective well-being, positive emotions, and absence of loneliness. According to the researchers, these indicators are reflective of an individual’s assessment of well-being and an important facet of personal efficacy in old age. A sample of 206 longitudinal survivors of a larger German aging study, were given a 12-item SOC questionnaire to assess selection, optimization, and compensation behaviors. The participants ranged in ages from 72 to 102 years old. Composite SOC scores were obtained. Subjective well-being, positive emotions, and absence of loneliness were assessed with German versions of the Philadelphia Center Morale Scale, the Positive Affect subscale of the Positive and Negative Affect Scale, and the UCLA Loneliness

Scale. The SOC composite index was significantly related to satisfaction with age, lack of agitation, emotional loneliness, social loneliness, and, marginally, to positive emotions. The two most powerful SOC predictors of successful aging were optimization and compensation.

That later adulthood is a time of continued growth and revision is also supported by Field and Milsap (1991). In a longitudinal study of the elderly, they found evidence of personality development well into advanced old age. An increase in agreeableness and a decline in extraversion were correlated with increasing age. Extraversion was defined as talkativeness, frankness, and excitability.

Melia's (1999) research with 39 Catholic nuns supports a connection between adaptation and healthy aging. She conducted life review interviews with women who ranged in age from 68 to 98 and shared strong religious beliefs. The nuns rated themselves as having generally good physical health although many of them had diabetes, cancer, blindness, and arthritic conditions. The participants were interviewed in depth using a modified reminiscence tool designed to draw out memories related to personal histories, life stories, and turning points in their lives. The interview included questions concerning successes, disappointments, pleasures, strengths, and weaknesses. The interview narratives were analyzed for evidence of ego integrity operationalized into five components: a sense of peace, life satisfaction, acknowledgement of death, philosophy of life, and wisdom to share. Thirty-two of the 39 women interviewed had reached ego integrity. Certain adaptive themes apparent in their life reviews included faith, family, education, friends, community service, and prayer. According to Melia, the

themes served as “sources of meaning during times of transition and are related to ego integrity as it is continuously reestablished in later life” (p.186).

Much of the gerontology literature suggests that the older adult is in a perpetual state of revision in terms of adjusting to health and mobility issues, unresolved dreams and goals, losses associated with death and changing relationships, and changes in work and leisure activities. Those who adapt positively to such changes and continue to have a healthy sense of self report the most favorably on the aging process. Rather than a deficit model of aging, a more appropriate model of successful aging and psychological health is one of adaptation, incorporating the mental strategies of optimization and compensation. Dittman-Kohli (1990) attributed the strategy of optimization as contributing to the “creation of positive meaning in old age” (p. 291). From her study on comparisons of cognitions in older and younger adults, she found that older individuals no longer engage in excessive self-criticism and achieve acceptance of self and life by changing the content and standards of how life and self are evaluated. The following attitudes and behaviors seem suggestive of such adaptive strategies: (a) making the most out of the current situation and available resources; (b) creating additional resources by thinking and living outside the box; (c) being open to change; (d) being flexible; (e) finding meaning and purpose in new and different ways or renewing old interests and passions. When the current situation is no longer working, older adults can change it or change the way in which they view it.

According to George Vaillant, MD. (2002), psychiatrist and professor at Harvard Medical School, whether aging is a positive or negative experience is a matter of attitude

and perception. In his latest book, *Aging Well*, Vaillant stated, “Not only is aging a very complex concept; it carries very different meanings for different people [ranging from] “decay” [to] “continued development until death” (p.39). Vaillant’s book was the outgrowth of a comprehensive longitudinal study of human development which he directed while at Harvard. Vaillant and his colleagues followed 864 individuals from their teens into old age. Findings from the Study of Adult Development suggest that attitudes are as important to successful aging as nutrition, exercise, low cholesterol, or even a smoke-free lifestyle.

Three cohort groups (the socially advantaged Harvard group, the socially disadvantaged Inner City group, and Terman’s gifted women’s group) were studied continuously for six to eight decades. Both the Harvard group and the Inner City group were all male. From this comprehensive study, Vaillant discovered several factors that contributed to aging well. These included joy in living, loving, the ability to forgive, play and creativity, and “learning something that we did not know yesterday” (p. 185).

According to Vaillant, successful aging involves maintaining social, emotional, and physical health. Within the male cohort groups, the participants were assigned to one of three categories of health based on objective and subjective measures. The objective measures included physical exams, psychometric tests, and researcher ratings. Subjective measures were obtained by self-report on questionnaires designed to assess feelings and perceptions about wellness and satisfaction with life. Vaillant represented healthy aging by differentiating the Happy-Well from the Sad-Sick based on participant scores representing six contrasting dimensions of physical, mental, and social health. Subjective

health was found to be as important to healthy aging as objective physical health and involved “experiencing the ravages of age without feeling sick” (p.186).

The groups were assessed at age 50. Six protective factors predictive of healthy aging were identified for the Harvard cohort. These were (a) not being a smoker or having stopped smoking; (b) adaptive coping style; (c) absence of alcohol abuse; (d) healthy weight, (e) stable marriage; and (f) some exercise. A seventh protective factor also contributed to healthy aging for the Inner City and Terman (gifted) women’s cohort. For the Harvard group, those with fewer than two protective factors at age 50 were dead at age 80. Those with fewer than four were three times as likely to be dead 30 years later than those with more protective factors. For the 114 Inner City men who were assessed with four protective factors at age 50, 95 % were still living at age 70 and 58 % were identified as Happy-Well.

Vaillant reported that while health data were not collected systematically for the gifted women, the same protective factors that helped the Inner City and the Harvard men age well also helped the women. The Harvard study found that people with more positive feelings about aging increased their longevity by 7.5 years as opposed to individuals with less positive feelings. In his book, Vaillant described aging well in terms of forgiveness, gratitude, and joy. He spoke about healthy aging as being longevity without objective or subjective disability.

Vaillant also believed that social and emotional maturation were important in successful aging as evidenced through the life histories of his participants. Social maturity was related to the mastery of six adult life tasks: identity, intimacy, career

consolidation, generativity, keeper of the meaning, and integrity. Vaillant's life tasks are quite similar to Erikson's (1963) life cycle of ego development with the exceptions of *career consolidation* and *keeper of the meaning*. According to Vaillant's model of adult development, mastery of career consolidation "involves expanding one's personal identity to assume a social identity within the world of work" (p. 46). Vaillant equates the task of *keeper of the meaning* as "conservation and preservation of the collective products of mankind" [and] "involves developing concern for a social radius that extends beyond one's immediate community" (p.48). According to Vaillant, emotional maturity was related to "the development of adaptive coping mechanisms" (p.60). He identified four coping strategies associated with maturity: altruism, sublimation, suppression, and humor. Vaillant defined each of the mechanisms as they relate to being a mature, emotionally healthy adult. Altruism is "doing as one would be done by" (p. 64). Sublimation refers to "artistic creation to resolve conflict and spinning straw into gold" (p. 64). Suppression is characterized by "a stiff upper lip, patience, and seeing the bright side" [while humor is] "the ability not to take oneself too seriously" (p. 64).

In the book's final chapter, Vaillant summarized the various attributes, attitudes, and outlooks observed as pathways to growing old gracefully. These include "caring about others; being open to new ideas; maintaining social utility; being tolerant of the indignities of old age; retaining a sense of humor and a capacity for play; taking sustenance from past accomplishments while remaining curious and continuing to learn from the next generation; and maintaining contact and intimacy" (p.310-311).

David Snowden's research with nuns produced similar evidence that positive emotions and attitudes in tandem with caring and connectedness tend to be associated with successful or graceful aging and increased longevity. Snowden (2001) found that these positive attributes and behaviors may actually deter the progression of Alzheimer's disease and serve as preventive factors in the development of the devastating age-related disease. In his recent book, *Aging with Grace*, Snowden shares the results of his famous Nun Study and what he has learned so far from the 678 School Sisters of Notre Dame about living longer, healthier, and more meaningful lives.

Snowden began his study in 1986. At that time, he was an assistant professor of epidemiology at the University of Minnesota and was interested in learning more about aging and health. Dr. Snowden is now recognized as one of the formidable world experts on Alzheimer's disease and is currently a professor of neurology at the Sanders-Brown Center on Aging at the University of Kentucky Medical Center.

Snowden selected the nuns for his longitudinal study because of their similarities in backgrounds and histories, lifestyles, jobs, health care, and income. They were ideal candidates for this type of research since their similar incomes and health care reduced the confounds of poverty and poor health care. Initial results of the study revealed a link between levels of education and mental and physical abilities in later life. Those sisters who were less educated had increased mortality rates and were more limited by mental and physical impairments.

Later, Snowden expanded his work with the nuns to include the study of Alzheimer's disease. According to Snowden, Alzheimer's affects up to 45 % of older

adults over the age of 85. The purpose of the research was to learn more about brain reserve. The hypothesis of brain reserve suggests that the amount of disability associated with Alzheimer's does not adequately reflect the extent of brain damage rendered by the disease. The stronger the brain, the more resilient it is to the manifestation of symptoms even when there is significant structural damage to the brain tissue. A stronger brain is characterized as "more efficient, with better processing capacity" (p.45). More efficient processing capabilities may lead to enhanced flexibility or plasticity which can serve to establish new neural pathways to replace those damaged by Alzheimer's. Snowden was interested in learning more about Alzheimer's because he saw this disease as the "major roadblock to aging successfully" (p.46).

Six-hundred seventy-eight out of the 1,027 eligible sisters participated in the study which included annual mental and physical exams, analysis of personal autobiographies, and brain autopsies. The sisters who participated agreed to become organ donors at the time of their deaths, donating their brains to Snowden's research team for scientific study. Brain research has identified a few genes linked to Alzheimer's; however, it is believed that "a dozen or more genes may work in tandem to increase susceptibility or resistance" to the disease (p. 80).

Snowden's Nun Study suggests that certain protective factors may slow the progression of Alzheimer's or stave off the full blown mental manifestations of the disease. Snowden examined the life histories of two of the sisters who entered the convent at the same time. Both were from Germany and had similar backgrounds. Both received their teaching certificates and were highly intelligent. Their personalities were

different, however. Maria was more sedate, private, and controlled. Delores was bubbly and energetic. On the first day of school--they both taught elementary education--Maria suffered what appeared to be an episode of severe depression and had to take a leave of absence. Over the next 10 years, she developed a tooth infection, contracted tuberculosis, and suffered another bout of depression. She was advised not to return to teaching and worked as a seamstress until she retired.

The other sister, Delores, was first a teacher, then a principal. She taught nine months out of the year and attended college classes in the summer, earning her bachelor's degree at age 29 and her master's at 44. She became a professor of elementary education at 47. She then had the opportunity to become a geography instructor and returned to school to earn a MA in geography at age 51 and a Ph.D. at age 55. At age 66, she realized her childhood dream of working in Africa. Two years after Maria's retirement, Delores was starting a starvation remedying project in Kenya. At age 76, she took a sabbatical to teach herself technology skills. She left Kenya at age 80 and returned to the states with her earlier dream fulfilled. Maria, on the other hand, developed Alzheimer's and died at age 80 from pneumonia.

Snowden looked at several factors that could account for the differences in Maria's and Delores' fates. Maria had a different upbringing than Delores. Maria's family environment was rigid and cold while Delores' family was warm and supportive. Another difference between the two sisters was their level of education. Delores completed her bachelor's, two master's degrees, and a Ph.D. Maria's infirmities kept her from completing her education. A third difference between Maria and Delores was their

mental status. Delores appeared mentally healthy while Maria was prone to depression. Whether family circumstances contributed to her depression or the depression was linked to Alzheimer's is uncertain. Although depression has been observed more often in Alzheimer's patients than in healthy individuals, the link is unclear. Snowden reports that "between 15 to 40 % of Alzheimer's patients are depressed depending on which study you believe" (p.82). Some studies suggest that people who had been depressed before the onset of Alzheimer's were 1.8 times more at risk to develop the disease. Good mental health, a warm and supportive environment, and education may be protective factors in the development of Alzheimer's as suggested by the contrasting lifestyles of Maria and Delores.

Snowden continued to explore the link between emotions and successful aging. He examined the emotional content of 178 nun autobiographies written by the sisters when they were in their early twenties. Snowden and his research team determined that the writers could be divided into *listers* or *high-fidelity* writers who wrote with "sensuous detail and vivid feeling" (p.186). Continuing this line of emotional analysis, the researchers identified every word in the autobiographies that reflected an emotional experience. These words were coded as positive, negative, or neutral. Out of the 90,000 words written, only 1,598 related to emotional experiences. Eighty-four percent of the words were classified as positive while fourteen percent were negative and one percent, neutral. The autobiographies were sorted into four groups based on the number of expressions of positive emotions. After adjusting for age, education, and linguistic ability, the final analysis supported a strong link between positive emotional content and

longevity. In the group with the lowest positive-emotional content the average age of death was 86.6 increasing to 86.8 for the second group. The average age of death went up to 90 in the third group and to 93.5 for group 4 which contained the greatest number of positive expressions. From the lowest to the highest groups, positive emotions accounted for the survival difference of 6.9 years. Based on these results, Snowden concluded that “a positive outlook early in life contributes to longevity” (p.194).

Snowden’s findings were similar to those of researchers at the Mayo Clinic (as cited in Snowden, 2001). Mayo researchers tracked 839 patients who were classified on standardized personality tests as either an optimist or a pessimist. An optimist has a positive outlook on life; pessimists tend to view the world more negatively. A significantly greater number of optimists than pessimists were still alive 30 years later.

At the beginning of 2001, 295 of the original 678 participants in the Nun Study were still alive. Eighteen of the sisters lived to be at least 100. Snowden offered these clues to their longevity: their profound faith, a positive outlook, and the power of community. The Nun Study has produced powerful information related to Alzheimer’s, longevity, and healthy aging. In future studies, Snowden plans to extend his research on emotion and to explore the role of personality in the aging process.

Having a positive outlook on life can be equated to life satisfaction. Life satisfaction has been linked with having a keen sense of meaning and purpose. Reker, Peacock, and Wong (1987) found that older adults report greater degrees of life satisfaction than do younger adults. They administered the Life Attitude Profile (Reker & Peacock, 1981, as cited in Reker et. al, 1987) and the Perceived Well-Being Scale (Reker

& Wong, 1984) to 300 adults divided into five developmental stages ranging from young adulthood (16-29) to old-old (75 years and older). The Life Attitude Profile was based on Frankl's (1978) will to meaning and measures 7 dimensions: Existential Vacuum, Life Control, Death Acceptance, Will to Meaning, Goal Seeking, and Future Meaning. Each of the profile's 45 items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale. The Perceived Well Being Scale consists of 14 items related to psychological and physical well-being.

Psychological well-being was measured in terms of presence of positive emotions such as happiness, joy, and peace of mind and the absence of fear, anxiety, and depression.

Subjective physical well-being was measured by self-ratings of physical health and vitality and absence of physical discomforts. Significant univariate age effects were found for Life Control,  $F(4,286) = 4.07, p < .01$ , and Death Acceptance,  $F(4, 287) = 9.77, p < .001$ . Life Purpose in terms of contentment, fulfillment, and satisfaction were lower in young adulthood and reached their highest level in old age. Death acceptance ratings were also linear, with older adults being more accepting of death than the younger participants. Will to meaning was found to be high across all age groups supporting Frankl's theory that the will to meaning is the essence of humanity. Life Attitudes of Future Meaning, Life Purpose, and Life Control were positively related to perceived psychological and physical well-being. Some 15 years later, both Snowden's Nun-Study and Vaillant's work on adult development support Reker's findings that positive attitudes and feelings are related to mental and physical well-being and successful aging.

The stereotypical image of old age as a time of deficits, seclusion, dependency, and senility seems out of place in our contemporary age. The image portrayed in the life stories of many older adults is one of resiliency in face of adversity, adaptability, and the drive to seize or create fulfillment whether in work, love, or leisure. Such resiliency appears to be indicative of psychological health in the later adult years and a key to successful aging.

### Conceptual Framework

Rather than adhering to the more traditional aging theories previously described, the present study of aging athletes is theoretically framed in the work of three theorists- Victor Frankl, Robert Kegan, and George Kelly. Each of the three supports the same basic premise that individuals construct and assign personal meaning to life experiences. The gerontology literature indicates that positive attitudes and feelings, healthy perceptions of self and life, and engaging in purposeful, meaningful activities are linked to successful aging. Theories that deal with perceptions of self in relation to the external world and finding meaning and purpose in life seem an appropriate theoretical framework for understanding more about the aging experience from the perspective of the senior athlete.

Frankl (1978) believed that the essence of humanity lies in searching for meaning and purpose in life through actions, deeds, experiencing a value such as love, or through suffering. He attributed many of societal problems and human neuroses to a lack of life purpose and meaning, a condition he called an “existential vacuum” (Frankl, 1978, p. 23). Frankl developed *logotherapy* to address the spiritual dimension of humans, seeking to

help individuals alleviate the distress of the human spirit. Logotherapy literally means “therapy through meaning” (Frankl, 1978, p. 23).

Logotherapy is based on three main tenets: humanity’s will to meaning, the meaning of life, and the freedom of will. Frankl viewed the first tenet- the will to meaning- as the primary concern of human beings. Rather than seeing individuals reacting to stimuli or driven by impulses, Frankl posited that “all humans respond to questions that life is asking [by] fulfilling the meanings that life offers” (Frankl, 1978, p. 29). Responding to life, then, is equated with being responsible for answering life’s questions in terms of finding personal meaning and purpose. Frankl believed that, as human beings, rather than being concerned with what we may expect from life, we should understand that life expects something from us. We can only answer to life by answering for our lives. When the will to meaning is thwarted, the result is “existential frustration” (Frankl, 1984, p. 123) which, in turn, can result in a type of neurosis associated with the “dimension of human existence” (Frankl, 1984, p.123). According to Frankl, the will to meaning is the true manifestation of humanness and a “reliable criterion for mental health” (Frankl, 1978, p. 34).

When discussing his second tenet- the meaning of life- Frankl proposed that meanings due to their uniqueness are a matter of personal discovery and not transmitted genetically or through traditions or values: Meaning must be sought and found by oneself. Frankl compared the process of finding meaning to the Gestalt perception of finding a figure in a background. According to Frankl, the human organism “perceives the possibility embedded in reality” (Frankl, 1978, p. 38) and has the opportunity to

change reality by confronting a situation. Each situation is unique with a meaning that is unique and that the possibility of doing something about a situation is also unique and transitory.

Frankl discussed the possibilities of giving life meaning in terms of realizing values. He referred to creative values as those related to achieving tasks while experiential values are those realized through intimate relationships or by experiencing “the Good, the True, the Beautiful” (Frankl, 1965, p. xiii). He also discussed attitudinal values as those associated with finding meaning in suffering and “facing your fate without flinching” (p. xiii). Frankl viewed this type of suffering as the “highest achievement that has been granted to man” (p. xiii). Frankl’s own experience in a Nazi concentration camp led him to the conviction that “when we are no longer able to change the situation (...) we are challenged to change ourselves” (Frankl, 1984, p.135). Frankl believed that meanings are unique, ever-changing, and never missing from life even in the most seemingly hopeless situations.

Frankl’s third tenet involves the will to freedom. He spoke of human freedom as “freedom in spite of determinism” (Frankl, 1978, p. 47). In other words, freedom is a human phenomenon bound by conditions. Frankl believed that, while humans are not free from conditions, they are free to choose how they will respond to them. Human freedom was viewed by Frankl as the freedom to transcend the conditions and to detach from one’s self. Frankl referred to this phenomenon as *self-transcendence* which is only conceivable by viewing humanity as an open system in terms of relating to something or someone outside one’s self, whether that is relating to a meaning or encountering another

human being. During his experience in Auschwitz described in *Man's Search for Meaning* (1984), Frankl said that he freely chose an attitude of suffering with meaning. He transcended the condition of suffering to connect with a greater system of meaning and reason which enabled him to find meaning in the suffering.

Frankl referred to the therapeutic use of logotherapy as a “medical ministry” (Frankl, 1965, p. 270). According to Frankl, the practice of medical ministry is not limited to the treatment of neuroses but should be the work of every physician. Frankl believed that medical ministry was needed when patients are faced with incurable diseases of chronic invalidism or where persons face unalterable difficulties imposed from outside themselves. Medical ministry helps individuals to turn “suffering into inner achievement and to realize attitudinal values” (Frankl, 1965, p. 283). Frankl viewed logotherapy as a way of freeing people in order to take their unique responsibility upon themselves.

Frankl saw existential frustration as the result of not dealing with the spiritual aspect of humanity. He created logotherapy as an attempt to fill in the gaps and deal with the total person. Logotherapy was based on Frankl's extensive clinical and personal experiences as well as research with prisoners-of-war, drug abusers, university students, and attempted suicide survivors: All supported the meaning of life as the highest human goal. Several instruments have been developed as a means of operationalizing Frankl's concepts. These include The Purpose in Life Test, Logo-Test, and The Life Attitude Profile (as cited in Frankl, 1978).

Finding meaning and purpose in life may be challenging for older adults due to health issues, decreasing mobility, losses associated with death of family and friends, and loss of independence. Activities and relationships that were enjoyed in younger years may not be available or accessible to the older adult. At no one point over the lifespan does the human spirit appear to be more threatened than in old age.

The second theorist contributing to the study's theoretical framework is Robert Kegan and his model of the *evolving self*. Kegan (1982) created a six level life-span model of the developing ego based on 10 years of conversation with students, clients, informants, and colleagues. Influenced by his predecessors Piaget and Erikson, Kegan incorporated two schools of thought – constructivism and developmentalism- in creating a “neo-Piagetian approach” (Kegan, 1982, p. 4) to understanding personality by exploring the human organism's *meaning-making system*. Constructivists believe that individuals construct their own realities while developmentalists believe that organic systems evolve systematically through stages or eras according to consistent principles of stability and change. The constructive-developmental orientation attends to the evolution of meaning-constructing which, according to Kegan, is the “fundamental motion in personality” (p. 15). Kegan believed that personality is best understood as “a process, rather than an entity [which] gives rise to the ‘self’, the meaning- making system with which the process gets identified” (p. 5).

Kegan viewed personhood as an activity, “an ever progressive motion engaged in giving itself a new form” (p. 7). To Kegan, the activity of being human is the “activity of meaning-making” (p. 11). Kegan referred to this meaning-making activity as the process

of interaction between the self and the external world. He described the relationship between an individual and the external world as that person's way of "knowing the world" (p. 28) and making sense of it. A key tenet of his model is the notion of differentiation or emergence from embeddedness in an old self-other (subject-object) relationship and creating a new balance between self and other at increasing levels of complexity.

Kegan discussed the whole idea of balance between self and other in terms of what he called "object relations" (p. 76). Kegan used the word object to mean "a motion, an activity rather than a thing" (p. 76). Kegan described object relations in this manner:

"Object" speaks to that which some motion has made separate or distinct from, or to the motion itself; "object relations," by this line of reasoning, might have to do with our relations to that which some motion has made separate or distinct from us, our relations to that which has been thrown from us, or the experience of this throwing ourselves (p. 76).

Kegan stressed that in order to grasp the understanding of object-relations and "subject-object relations" (p. 77), one must have a clear understanding of personality in the context of motion. Personality, then, has to do with the motion of evolution which Kegan referred to as "a meaning-constitutive activity" (p. 77). The "evolutionary activity involves the very creating of the object (a process of differentiation) as well as our relating to it (a process of integration)" (p. 77). In other words, as the self becomes increasingly more differentiated from the external world, a new subjectivity is created in which self can take in, perceive, and know the world in a different way. The individual

can actually relate to the environment outside one's self rather than being *embedded* in it. Kegan referred to this embeddedness (Schachtel, 1959, as cited in Kegan, 1982) as human subjectivity in terms of projecting onto the world "our constitution of reality" (p.31).

In developing and explaining his model of the evolving self, Kegan drew heavily from Piaget's model of physical-cognitive development ( Piaget, 1952, as cited in Kegan, 1982). Kegan borrowed from Piaget such concepts as decentration and recenteration which involve losing a former center of attention and creating a new center. For example, the sensorimotor child in Era I, is characterized by Piaget as being subject to his perceptions of how the physical world is organized. The infant is embedded in its own reflex actions and is not able to distinguish itself from the environment. Pre-operational children cannot separate themselves from their perceptions in order to take them in as objects of their attention or their subjectivity. Kegan viewed Piaget's stages of development as being the "consequence of a given subject-object balance... and the process of movement [from one stage to another] is the evolutionary motion of differentiation and reintegration" (p. 39). He saw the child's early development as result of rebalancing, moving the action-sensing of the infant from subject to object and creating the first equilibrium- the preoperational stage. Kegan referred to the process of creating a new balance between subject and object or self and other as an "evolutionary truce" (p. 28). Each new truce or subject-object balance allows the individual to relate to the world in a more complex and meaningful way.

Kegan's model of the evolving self consists of six stages or truces. The first evolutionary truce, Stage 0, is termed The Incorporative Balance and begins the process of meaning-making. The infant at Stage 0 cannot distinguish itself from the external world. During Stage 1, The Impulsive Balance, the toddler has moved from a place of embeddedness in its reflexes to a position of having reflexes. The child is now able to distinguish itself from the external world in order to relate to its surroundings rather than perceiving itself as embedded in the environment. At Stage 2, The Imperial Balance, the child is embedded in perceptions and impulses but has a private world, a self-containment that was not evident in Stage 1. The Interpersonal Balance of Stage Three finds the developing individual now capable of interpersonal relations. The self at this stage is actually embedded in relationships, knowing the world and defining oneself through others. In Stage 4, The Institutional Balance, the individual has moved from being the relationship to having a relationship. The self now identifies with the institution it is trying to run: In fact, it is the institution. In The Interindividual Balance of Stage 5, the self has separated itself from the institution and can now manage the institution without being embedded in it. The aims of the new self reach beyond that particular organization.

Each subsequent truce involves a greater degree of self individuation, thereby creating a more durable self. The need for a new truce is evidenced by the awareness that the current way of knowing or relating to the world is no longer working. To Kegan, ego development involves moving from embeddedness to a place of individuation, resulting in a new and more meaningful relationship between the self and the world. Rather than a fixed progression, Kegan visualized the evolution of meaning-making as a continual back

and forth movement that included revisiting old issues at new levels of complexity across the lifespan.

Old age is perhaps a time for revisiting old issues or for experiencing and relating to the external world in new and more feasible ways. Kegan's model, although complex, seems appropriate for facilitating the understanding aging process in terms of revising or discarding former ways of conceptualizing self and relating to the external world.

The third theory utilized as a framework for the study of aging athletes is George Kelly's Personal Construct Theory (1963). Kelly posited that human psychological functioning is oriented toward anticipation of events as a means of reducing anxiety and making sense out of life experiences. In order to anticipate an event, it has to be construed or interpreted by the individual. Kelly viewed the human organism as looking at the world through "transparent patterns or templets which he creates and then attempts to fit over the realities of which the world is composed" (p. 9). Kelly assigned the name *construct* to those "patterns tentatively tried on for size" (p. 9). A construct, then, is "a representation of the universe, erected by a living creature and then tested against the reality of that universe" (p. 12). Constructs, then, are "ways of seeing the world" (p. 12) in which we live. Kelly saw constructs as enabling humans to chart a course of behavior: Constructs are constantly altered or expanded to provide a better fit with reality. He believed that "each day's experience calls for the consolidation of some aspects of our outlook, revision of some, and outright abandonment of others" (p. 14).

According to Kelly, constructs are organized in a hierarchal fashion to help individuals understand events and predict the future. Rather than developing in stages, Kelly viewed the psychosocial development of individuals as a series of interpretations and reinterpretations of themselves and their situations in a variety of forms. Disconfirmation or invalidation of anticipated events necessitates reconstruction. Two sources of invalidation among adult adults are biological changes and interpersonal changes. Denying the need for reinterpretation or reconstruction may result in unhealthy coping mechanisms such as preoccupation with physical health, dependency, or social withdrawal.

Kelly viewed his theory of personal constructs as a new or alternative theory of personality that abandoned many of the terms traditionally associated with personality psychology such as *ego*, *cognition*, *drive*, and *motivation* in order to focus on persons and processes. As Kegan, Kelly saw the human being as a form of motion rather than an object in a mobile state. Kelly regarded all humans as scientists trying to make sense of their own experiences or constructs. Human functioning, according to Kelly, is oriented toward the anticipation of events and the reduction of uncertainty.

The central underlying assumption of Personal Construct Theory is constructive alternativism which proposes that “all present interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement ” (p.15). Individuals construct events in different ways as well as develop organizational construction systems that embrace the relationship between constructs. Kelly’s expansive theory consists of a fundamental postulate and eleven

corollaries or propositions. These are listed below:

1. Fundamental Postulate: A person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he [*sic*] anticipates events.
2. Construction Corollary: A person anticipates events by construing their replications.
3. Individuality Corollary: Persons differ from each other in their construction of events.
4. Organization Corollary: Each person characteristically evolves, for his [*sic*] convenience in anticipating events, a construction system embracing ordinal relationships between constructs.
5. Dichotomy Corollary: A person's construction system is composed of a finite number of dichotomous constructs.
6. Choice Corollary: A person chooses for himself [*sic*] that alternative in a dichotomized construct through which he [*sic*] anticipates the greater possibility for extension and definition of his [*sic*] system.
7. Range Corollary: A construct is convenient for the anticipation of a finite range of events only.
8. Experience Corollary: A person's construction system varies as he [*sic*] successfully construes the replication of events.
9. Modulation Corollary: The variation in a person's construction system is limited by the permeability of the constructs within whose range of convenience the variants lie.

10. Fragmentation Corollary: A person may successively employ a variety of construction subsystems which are inferentially incompatible with each other.

11. Commonality Corollary: To the extent that one person employs a construction of experience which is similar to that employed by another, his [*sic*] psychological processes are similar to the other person.

12. Sociality Corollary: To the extent that one person construes the construction processes of another, he [*sic*] may play a role in a social process involving the other person.

The fundamental postulate of constructive alternativism serves as the foundation on which the 11 corollaries rest. Each subsequent corollary explains the previous one in a more complex way. The postulate and each of the corollaries are strategically related to one another and are relevant to the phenomenon under examination - personal constructs.

The first corollary speaks to the individuality of personal constructs: Persons construct events in different ways. The purpose of the organizational corollary is to minimize incompatibilities and inconsistencies. Individuals develop organizational construction systems that reflect a relationship between constructs. The dichotomous corollary emphasizes that a person's construction system is made up of a finite number of constructs based on similarities and contrasts. The choice corollary deals with a person's ability to choose the alternative in a dichotomized construct in anticipation of greater opportunity for comprehensiveness and explicitness of the personal construction system. The appropriate choice serves to protect one's self and preserve one's integrity.

The range corollary states that a construct is only useful for anticipating a finite range of events. That which is out of the *range of convenience* of the construct is considered irrelevant. The experience corollary addresses the variation of a person's construct system with respect to construing the replication of events. Changes in the system vary: Some changes lead to disruption and others lead to stabilization. As hypotheses are successively revised in light of a sequence of events, the construction system undergoes a progressive evolution. In other words, the individual reconstructs the experience or the event. Experience, then, is related to successfully construing events.

The modulation corollary deals with the variation in the construction system in terms of *permeability* of constructs. A construct is considered permeable if it has the capacity to add new experience and events to those which it already embraces. This process sounds very similar to the adaptive strategies of assimilation and accommodation reflected in the life stories of older adults. The fragmentation corollary states that a person may employ various construction subsystems that are not necessarily direct derivatives of former constructs but may be due to changes within a larger system. For example, each time a person encounters change or ideas undergo revision, the individual must elicit a permeable construct which provides a thread of consistency in his or her behavior. The thread of consistency sounds similar to the life themes that Melia and Thompson observed in their studies with older adults.

The commonality corollary proposes that, when similar constructions of experience are employed by different individuals, their psychological processes are similar. The similarity in the construction of events is the basis for the similar action and

not the identity of the events themselves. In other words, when an event is interpreted by different individuals with similar constructs, the views of the event or experience are also similar. The eleventh and last of Kelly's corollaries is the sociality corollary which addresses social interactions. Individuals interact socially by construing the construction processes of others. Similar backgrounds tend to contribute to individuals seeing and doing things alike but do not necessarily guarantee social harmony, for one may understand better than he or she is understood.

Kelly referred to the psychology of personal constructs as "not so much a theory about man as...a theory of man" (p. 183). It is the effort "to catch the sense of man going about his business of being human, and what on earth it means to be a person" (p.183). Kelly further characterized PCT as the personal adventure of humans and their relentless pursuit of "something out there" (p. 183). He stressed that humans will not stop this pursuit "until they have seized it in their own hands" (p.183). This characterization sounds quite similar to Frankl's will to meaning.

Kelly viewed the psychology of personal constructs as a psychology of the "inner outlook" [rather than the] "outer inlook" (p. 183). Constructive alternativism can be the route to finding new meaning in life and regaining a sense of control over circumstances. As individuals develop new means of overcoming obstacles, they are no longer prisoners of their environment or victims of their past.

Personal Construct Theory seems an appropriate framework for exploring the personal constructs of older adults to learn how they construe the experience of aging. Viney (1989) developed a socio-phenomenological model for the elderly based on PCT.

Her model addresses biological and interpersonal changes as possible sources of invalidation that could lead to psychological problems. Through support and validation, older adults can engage in constructive revisions of their construing systems to construe predictions and outcomes in new, more meaningful ways. Much of reminiscence therapy is theoretically undergirded by PCT in attempting to replace negative outlooks and attitudes with positive ones.

### Summary

Traditional theories of aging were presented and evaluated in terms of their usefulness in understanding the aging experience. Disengagement theory was seen as being death-oriented rather than life-oriented and did not address the growth and changes in later life reflected in much of the aging literature. While Erikson's model of ego-development is used extensively as a basis for aging research and reminiscence studies, this model did not fully explain the aging experience from the perspective of being growth-oriented. Perhaps adding a ninth stage would have enhanced his model in terms of reflecting the growth and changes that have been observed in older adulthood. The process of adaptation was explored somewhat in Erikson's *Vital Involvement in Old Age* (1986) but could be addressed more thoroughly with contemporary older adults. Ackley's continuity theory remains a theoretical staple in reminiscence and life review studies. While there is some support for this in terms of identity as a continuous life theme carrying over into old age, the theory does not fully address the personal meaning systems of older adults with respect to the self renewal and reorganization reflected in

various aging studies (Barak & Rahtz, 1999; Coleman et. al., 1993; Dittman-Kohli, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 1998; Reker et. al., 1987; Thompson, 1992).

Various aging studies have explored the psychosocial issues related to aging and found that successful aging is linked to positive emotions and outlooks, objective and subjective physical and mental health, playfulness and creativity, meaningful activities, and caring for and being connected to others (Erikson, 1978; Longley, 2002; Melia, 1999; Reker et. al., 1987; Snowden, 2001; Thompson, 1992; Vaillant, 2002). Aging research has also focused on self perceptions of the aging experience and the need for a revised sense of self in response to age-related physical and environmental changes (Barak & Rahtz, 1999; Botella & Feixas, 1993; Coleman et. al., 1993; Dittman-Kohli, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 1998). Such revision and reorganization suggests that adaptation is a necessary component of successful aging. How the aging self is perceived in relation to the external world contributes to the psychological well-being of the older adult. Perceptions of self and others are outgrowths of an individual's personal meaning system.

The theories of Frankl (1978), Kegan (1982), and Kelly (1963) are considerably more useful than traditional aging theories in conceptualizing the experience of the aging athlete from the stance of the personal meaning system. The present study explores the personal meaning systems of older athletes in terms of how aging is perceived and the role of athletics in enhancing the aging experience. Successful aging has been associated with a positive outlook, energy and vitality, meaningful activities, and connectedness to others. Logotherapy, the evolving self, and the psychology of personal constructs are related to the meanings that individuals assign to themselves and to the world around

them.

Kelly saw psychological development as a series of interpretations and reinterpretations of self and events. Kegan viewed the developing ego in terms of balancing and rebalancing the interpretation of the self and its relationship to the external environment of which significant others are a part. Frankl believed that the essence of humanity is the will to meaning. If this will is thwarted, then an existential vacuum occurs, and if not addressed, results in neuroses originating from the spiritual dimension. Logotherapy addresses spirituality issues in terms of finding meaning and purpose of life. Finding meaning meaning and purpose in one's life is associated with physical and mental well being and satisfaction with life (Reker et. al, 1987). Finding meaning and purpose in later life can be challenging due to the biological and environmental changes associated with aging.

### Conclusion

Older adulthood is a time of growth, change, revision, and reinterpretation of self. Continued personal growth and psychological health in later life are associated with the capacity for adaptation. Adaptation is related to the ability to reinterpret and reposition the self in the external environment in response to changes associated with the aging process. Physical and environmental changes are part of normal aging. Bodies and abilities change; relationships are lost or changed; activities and interests may change. Learning more about the personal meaning systems of older adults is important in understanding the adaptation process as it relates to successful aging.

Successful aging has been linked to incorporating adaptation and changes into current and newly-found activities and relationships. The present study explores the aging experience from the perspective of the senior athlete to learn more about the role of athletics in contributing to successful aging. The personal meaning system of the older athlete is examined in terms of perceptions related to the aging process, interpretations and reinterpretations of self and situations, and the significance of current athletic activity in creating a meaningful, engaged lifestyle. Exploring the role of athletics in the life of the older adult can contribute to our understanding of how athletic participation may address and fulfill many of the psychosocial components of successful aging, including meaningful activities, connectedness, and adaptation or reorganization of self.

## Chapter 3

### METHOD

#### Historical Background of Study/Researcher Subjectivity

I became interested in the study of aging when my own father entered a challenging period in his life. Challenging from the physical and psychological standpoints. At age 84, he was diagnosed with several major physical problems. His once manageable diabetes had escalated to the point that his bladder had been severely damaged. He became restricted to the use of a catheter. His diabetes had progressed to the point that he now required daily insulin. Around the same time, an abdominal aorta aneurism was detected. It was not at the size which required surgery but had to be monitored closely for growth. These three conditions were a matter of concern but more for my mother than my father in terms of the daily regiment of blood sugar monitoring, insulin injections, and catheter maintenance. The greatest concern or inconvenience to my father was his complete dependence on the catheter. Naturally, for anyone dealing with these physical discomforts and health concerns, daily functioning can become a huge issue. Certainly the physical changes were a legitimate basis for my father's depressed state, and there may have been biochemical changes as well, contributing to the depression. Even so, at the core of my father's depression seemed to be a sense of purposelessness. There was nothing to fill his time. His whole world, and my mother's, revolved around attendance to his daily physical needs. My father tended to take less of an interest in his overall care and assumed the role of the patient.

Such a drastic change. Although my father had experienced several bouts of ill health, surgeries, and accidents throughout his life, he was always able to deal with them by maintaining some sense of control or self-sufficiency even during those times he was confined to bed. Perhaps he saw those particular times as temporary. Perhaps he knew this too would pass and he would again be outdoors, working and puttering, as he so loved to do. Having worked hard all his life in the building industry, he was always active, particular outdoors, and could fix anything. He was used to being sought after for advice on anything and everything. Even after retirement, he remained active, still doing most of his yard work, gardening, and loved to travel. He so loved to go and experience new things and food. He loved to eat.

As time went on, my mother and I became more cognizant of the probability that the catheter was not temporary, as initially hoped. Perhaps my father was more aware of that probability than he indicated. He began to approach life with a less hopeful attitude. He became quite despondent. He was always strong, independent, self-reliant-- a doer, a worker. Now he was unable to do many of the things for himself which the normally functioning individual takes very much for granted. We noticed on the days that my father was going to a doctor's appointment, which he did frequently, that he was a little spunkier. He wanted to walk by himself and do more things independently. So much sometimes that the doctors would marvel at his physical condition which primarily remained unchanged. The physicians were more oblivious to any emotional issues even after being informed of these by my mother. After this pattern went on for some time, the physical not really aligning with the emotional side, we began to ponder if indeed my

father's depressed state was related to activity or rather the lack of activity. Of course, the relationship between physical activity and emotional well being is well documented in terms of boosting endorphin levels and increasing blood and oxygen flow to the vital organs. When we feel better physically, naturally, we feel better emotionally.

The days that my father could be coaxed into leaving his chair and walking around the room, we noticed improvement in his overall attitude. He tended to be more upbeat. As he progressed to the point that he actually went outside the house, we saw more improvement. Even greater improvement, when he actually left the parameters of his home to go for a ride. It didn't really matter where. The doctor's, the grocery store, the bank. Whatever errands my mother was involved in doing, she insisted on getting him out of the house to accompany her. We were seeing the benefits. We began to see my father attempt more things for himself. Some days he became quite jovial and was quite talkative to those who came to visit. Every day was different. Some days he got up and was ready to go. Other days he preferred to be left alone.

Over the last four years, my father's physical condition has remained basically the same. The aneurism has grown some but not to an operable size. The catheter is now a permanent fixture. The diabetes is more or less controlled by insulin with some adjustments in dosage periodically. He still has blue periods. They come and go. The relational pattern between activity and mood continues to be observed. On the days my father has a reason to get up, his mood is elevated. On those days that he is more incapacitated, whether by weather conditions or circumstances, he tends to be *down*. His outlook on the present and the future are more positive on those days that he has

somewhere to go or something to do or even someone to visit with. If he arises with a purpose in mind, life makes sense, perhaps. There is some hope. Recently, he has been able to go to church more frequently. That definitely has been a bright spot in his life. Certainly the spiritual benefits of worship are paramount, but church involvement has also provided a sense of purpose and meaning and a more normal way of life. I have to applaud my father and my mother for getting to this point. Dad has worked on accommodating the physical changes so that his emotional and spiritual needs can be better met. Currently, my father is functioning on a more balanced emotional level, although he occasionally has days and even weeks that he is down. Overall though, my dad seems to be compensating for the physical loss and optimizing the resources he has to function in a more balanced and healthier mental and emotional state.

I share that personal experience with readers so that they can have a better grasp of what led to my current interest in the psychological issues of aging. Seeing how my father was psychologically impacted by age-related changes, I became very curious about the relationship between activity and aging well in terms of psychological health. I started reading about older individuals who had very debilitating illnesses but had very positive outlooks and were considered to be quite healthy, psychologically. Often these individuals were engaged in activities that were not so physical but were reported to be stimulating and gave them a great sense of joy and purpose. Having this keen sense of purpose seemed to be related to psychological well being. A pilot study with retirees supported this notion.

### Preliminary Study

In preparation for the dissertation study, I conducted a pilot study on the post retirement years (Longley, 2002) as part of a qualitative research class project. The purpose of the research was to learn more about psychological concerns of the older adult that may be associated with a loss of sense of purpose. Retirement was chosen as an appropriate focal point of the research since this event is often equated with the onset of older adulthood. Moving from a state of sustained employment to a place of unemployment generally is considered a major life event. I was curious to know how the move was handled and how individuals adjusted to the post-retirement years in terms of purpose and activities.

I interviewed five individuals who were already retired or were nearing retirement. I knew all but one of the participants. Two were volunteers at the school where I worked; another was employed part-time as a custodian at my school; one was a social worker who was still employed; and one, a retired educator, was referred by his daughter, a fellow classmate. The participants ranged in ages from 59 to 84. Three were female and two were male.

The interviews were semi-structured and loosely followed Seidman's (1991) phenomenological approach. Rather than three separate interviews as Seidman's model recommends, I met with four of the participants at least two times and one only once because he lived out of town. During the initial interviews, I focused on the past in terms of childhood, education, influences on career choice, early career paths, and the working years. The second interview focused on the last years of employment, the decision to

retire, initial retirement, adjustments to retirement, and activities, interests, and concerns of the post-retirement years. The sole interview with the retired educator covered these topics in abbreviated form. That particular interview lasted two hours. The interviews with the social worker nearing retirement followed the same format although the second interview dealt with issues related to actually engaging in retirement and perceptions of life after retirement.

Three common underlying themes were discovered in experiencing pre and post retirement: achieving balance, finding a niche, and growth and activity. Three sub themes were identified under the core theme of balance. These were characterized as opposing forces: entrapment vs. empowerment, isolation vs. involvement, and stagnation vs. stimulation. With the exception of one, each participant initially experienced retirement as a time of liberation, being set free from a place of stuckness, a condition I referred to as *entrapment*. The job had begun to literally consume all sense of self. Prior to retiring, four of the participants described feelings of being physical and emotionally drained, unchallenged, unfulfilled, in a rut. They had begun to lose their sense of purpose within the work environment. They could not see that their efforts were making a difference. Retirement, then, was seen as the great escape from the physical, mental, and emotional drudgery. There was an initial sense of relief and joy, a liberation of sorts. This euphoria tended to last from three months to a year.

The one participant who did not necessarily experience feelings of frustration with her job as the others but saw her retirement as a time to pass the torch to the younger

teachers coming into the world of public education. She felt it was time to give others the opportunity to teach. She continued teaching, however, in a voluntary capacity at one of the schools at which she began her teaching career. She truly never left the classroom.

Following the euphoric period, participants then described an ensuing sense of lostness, purposelessness, emptiness, boredom. Their worlds tended to shrink as they lost contact with many of their former working associates. As they had earlier sought freedom from work, they sought release from inactivity and isolation. They struggled to find their niche in a work-oriented world. The retired nurse and one of the retired teachers became school volunteers. The retired longshoreman became a part-time custodian at his daughter's school. The other educator got a part-time job at a local newspaper. The still employed social worker was in the stuck stage and was thinking about her retirement although it was still two years away. She was concerned that she would have no purpose, nothing to do, nothing to get up for. She was beginning to address this fear by developing an interest in woodworking.

All four retirees shared the common theme of continuous growth and activity. Aside from their paid or volunteer jobs, the participants were engaged in various other activities including family activities, educational pursuits, genealogy research, and church and community activities. All expressed the desire to stay active both physically and mentally. They wanted to be up doing something and not just sitting, wasting away. The pre-retiree was also concerned with this aspect of retirement, already planning to take educational classes just for fun to keep herself growing, learning, and challenged.

In this particular study, psychological well being during post-retirement was associated with having a strong sense of purpose and feeling connected to the external world. Retirement is a time of great change and can be viewed more as a process rather than an event. Many of the issues experienced in the post-retirement years tend to be associated with and parallel to the aging process in general. In the case studies of the four retirees and one future retiree, activity was repeatedly linked with successful retirement. The preliminary study with retirees, then, serves as appropriate groundwork for continued aging research with older adults engaged in athletic activity.

#### Research Parameters: Scope of the Study

The primary purpose of the research was to learn more about the aging experience from the perspective of the senior athlete. A secondary function of the study was to assess how well the theoretical framework held up in understanding the phenomena of athletic involvement and aging. The study was approached from the phenomenological perspective. A phenomenological orientation is concerned with the meanings, structure, and essence of a particular phenomenon or lived experience for a group of people (Patton, 1990). The particular phenomenon or lived experience in this study is the personal meaning system related to finding meaning and purpose in athletic involvement in later adulthood. The case selected for study was the senior cheerleading squad while members of the squad were treated as individual case studies. Although focused on cheerleading involvement, the study addressed the experience of aging in terms of how the senior cheerleaders interpreted the aging process within the context of athletic participation.

Researchers with a phenomenological orientation attempt to enter into the conceptual world of their participants in order to understand the meaning they construct around events in their lives (Bogdan & Bilken, 1998). By entering the conceptual world of the cheerleaders, I planned to gain a greater understanding of how the whole process of aging interplays with athletic involvement, and how aging is perceived by the senior women who participate in the sport of cheerleading. I was curious about the significance of cheerleading in the lives of these five women and how the experience related to their general philosophies and beliefs about life, relationships, and growing older. I wanted to learn more about their younger years and the impact of earlier decisions on their current levels of activity. According to Stake (1995), my study is as an example of “intrinsic case study” (p. 3) due to my particular interest in senior cheerleading. My research is not concerned so much with representativeness as it is with the uniqueness of cheerleading in later adulthood and, perhaps, the uniqueness of those individuals who participate in this activity.

### Participants

The participants were members of a senior cheerleading squad, jointly sponsored by the county Department of Aging and the city Recreation Division in the researcher’s hometown in southeastern North Carolina. The county operates the facility that houses the senior programming, and the city supplies the coordinator for the programming. The population of the city and surrounding county is roughly about 150,000.

At the time of the study, the cheerleading squad-- the Golden Pom-Pom Cheerleaders-- consisted of five members ranging in ages from 69 to 77. One of the

members was currently on inactive status due to health issues. Only one of the current members was a former cheerleader at school. Two of the members were married; three were divorced and never remarried. One of the current members was a native resident of the Wilmington, North Carolina area; the others were from California, Indiana, Tennessee, and New York. One of the members was employed part-time, whereas the other four were exclusively retired from paid employment. They were currently engaged in church and volunteer work as well as participating in other community activities and athletics in addition to cheerleading. The squad was comprised of White females but they desired more ethnic diversity and would also be open to male participation.

The team practices two times a week at the Senior Center in the health room where other types of fitness activities are held such as tai chi, aerobics, strength training, and dance. The Golden Pom-Pom Cheerleaders are directed by the Senior Activities Program Coordinator who has been in the position for six years. The coordinator is a Black female, around 35 years of age. She is a former cheerleader and has had extensive experience in both cheering and dancing. Her husband is a lay minister and she has a five year old son. The coordinator is the third person to hold the position. The previous coordinators were also women.

### Participants' Profiles

At 77, *Rose* is the oldest cheerleader. She is also the newest member of the squad. Rose has a poodle named Pumpkin, three adult sons, and three grandchildren. She was born in Indiana and lived in New York, working in the airline industry and for Macy's. Rose loves bowling, singing, and performing. She has a famous poet in her family.

*Corky* is the squad's captain and has been with the current squad the longest of any of the other members. She has been a Golden Pom-Pom Cheerleader for 15 years. She has been married to the same man for 50 plus years. They have one son and a daughter. *Corky's* granddaughter is a college cheerleader. *Corky* loves to travel and plays sports of all types. Her favorite sport is table tennis. *Corky* is currently the only one on the squad doing splits and cartwheels. *Corky* is 71.

A veteran of eleven years, *Dolli* is 75 and hails from Tennessee. An accomplished seamstress, *Dolli* still makes many of her own clothes as well as those worn by her five grandchildren. *Dolli* has four adult children- two boys and two girls. *Dolli* was divorced some twenty-two years ago, but since then has had two long term relationships. She loves to play bridge, tennis, and square dance. *Dolli* also has a dog.

*Catherine*, 71, probably has the most frequent flier miles in the group. She loves traveling, whether cross country or abroad. *Catherine* is originally from New York. She worked in human resources. She has one son and one daughter and three grandchildren. Like *Dolli* and *Rose*, *Catherine* is divorced. She works part-time in a *dishing* business which involves collecting and reselling china. *Catherine* also is a regular volunteer at the Humane Society. *Catherine* is happiest when she is with her family.

At 69, *Esther* is the youngest cheerleader and next to the newest member. Her first husband died of a heart attack. She remarried after raising three children, two sons and a daughter. She has five grandchildren. *Esther* and her husband have owned and operated various businesses over the years, including a western shop and a campground.

Esther has extensive experience in public relations. She is active in her church as well as political and community affairs.

#### Data Collection: Triangulation

The research data were collected over a seven month period using three different methods--interviews, observation, and document analysis. A paper and pencil questionnaire was also used to collect quantitative data related to psychological and health and overall well-being. The Life Attitude Profile-Revised (Reker, 1992) and the Perceived Well-Being Scale (Reker, 1995) were administered to all five cheerleaders. The LAP-R and the PWB-R have been used with older adults, as well as younger individuals, to assess feelings related to having a sense of purpose in life and perceptions of physical and psychological well-being. Having a greater sense of life purpose and has been associated with physical, mental, and psychological well-being (Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987; Reker, 1990; Reker, 1994; Reker, 1997)

Higher measures of life purpose and satisfaction have been found among older adults: Gerontology studies suggest that as people age, they renegotiate life goals and adjust expectations to accommodate age related changes (Barak & Raltz, 1999; Coleman et. al., 1999; Dittman-Kohli, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 1998; Thompson, 1992). The instruments were used to assess the personal meaning systems of the cheerleaders with respect to life purpose and satisfaction and perceived physical and psychological well being.

### Phenomenological Interviews

The interview is one of the mainstays in collecting qualitative data. It may be used solely or in conjunction with other methods of data collection such as observation and document analysis. The interview is used to collect descriptive data in the participants' own words so that the researcher can gain insight on how participants interpret some aspect of the world (Bogdan & Bilken, 1998).

Interviewing is a way to hear other people's stories. Seidman (1991) believes that "stories are a way of knowing [and] telling stories is essentially a meaning-making process" (p.1). Seidman sees telling stories as a meaning-making activity through the teller's selection, reflection, ordering, and making sense of the details of an experience. He asserts that "recounting narratives has been the major way throughout recorded history humans have made sense of their experience" (Seidman, 1991, p. 2). The stories of the five senior cheerleaders were windows into the subjective worlds of athletics and aging and provided a means of understanding what these experiences meant to each cheerleader based on individual and collective perceptions.

Seidman's "in-depth, phenomenologically based" (1991, p. 9) approach was used in interviewing the cheerleaders. This method combines life-history and focused, in-depth interviewing, primarily using open-ended questions. Using open-ended questioning, the interviewer builds on and explores responses to those questions. According to Seidman, the goal of this type of interviewing is "to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience with the topic under study" (p. 9).

Seidman (1991) used a three step approach to the interview process. He felt that behavior is better understood and is more meaningful when placed in the context of an individual's life and the lives of those around that individual. Using Seidman's model, the researcher meets with each participant three separate times over a two to three week period. The first interview establishes the context of the experience. The researcher does this by asking the participant to tell as much as possible about him or herself up to the present time. Questions are geared toward the topic of interest and pathways associated with that topic. The first interview is also a time to build rapport between the person interviewing and the person being interviewed. During the second interview, participants reconstruct the concrete details of the experience within the context in which it occurs. The focus is on the present. The third interview gives participants an opportunity to reflect on the personal meaning of the experience. Making sense of the experience requires that the participants look at and reflect upon how various factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their current situation.

Originally, three interviews were planned for the oldest and newest squad members as well as the captain. Due to the small size of the squad, I opted to interview all five members to obtain richer data. The interview format paralleled the Three-Interview Series approach used by Seidman (1991). Seidman recommended doing three 90 minute interviews over a two to three week time frame. Due to time constraints on the part of the participants, not all of the interviews were exactly 90 minutes in length nor were they all conducted over a two-week period. Several of the cheerleaders were out of town for various reasons and at various times so the interviews were scheduled at those

times that were most convenient for the participants. The ladies tended to have extremely busy schedules which proved to be quite challenging in conducting the three separate interviews. For example, two of the cheerleaders played tennis two to three times a week. During tournament matches, they were unable even to make regularly scheduled cheerleading practices. Another cheerleader was a frequent traveler and missed several weeks of practice due to her traveling agenda. All the cheerleaders were extremely cooperative throughout the interview phase, given their other commitments and responsibilities. The first interview was conducted on June 24, 2003 and the last was completed on Oct. 7, 2003.

Interviews were generally conducted on Tuesdays and Thursdays either immediately preceding or immediately following practice. The interviews ranged in length from one to two hours. No single interview was less than 60 minutes nor longer than two hours. Two of the interview sessions had to be rescheduled due to illness on the part of the interviewees.

The phenomenological interviews followed Seidman's "three-interview series" (1991, p. 10) format. The first interview consisted of a "focused life history" (p. 11) of the participant, focusing on past events and experiences leading up to the current level of cheerleading participation. The life history dealt with the participant's childhood, family, significant relationships, school experiences, and activities or interests prior to cheerleading. The route to current athletic participation was explored in terms of previous athletic involvement in earlier years.

The second interview dealt with the present experience of cheerleading and the participant's perspective regarding the significance of the activity in relation to other current life events, relationships, and life goals. I was interested in how involvement in cheerleading was experienced by each cheerleader and how it was related to the overall aging process as perceived by individual cheerleaders. This interview included clues to the personal meaning system of the cheerleaders in terms of beliefs and philosophies regarding the experience of aging and relating to life as an older adult.

Interview three focused on reflections of the meaning of their involvement with cheerleading based on past life experiences and general philosophies and beliefs about life and aging. Each individual cheerleader was asked to make sense of her current level of participation based on personal beliefs and past experiences. Pathways to cheerleading involvement were explored and reflected upon in terms of their influence and contributions to current senior lifestyles.

### Interview Questions

A semi structured or focused format was used in which the topic was introduced and the discussion guided by specific questioning (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Although I was guiding the discussion, the interviewee had much latitude in their responses and what aspects of their lives they chose to share. The first interview began with an orientation to the overall interview process and what areas would be covered during each of the three sessions. Examples of questions asked in this first session were "Can you share something about your growing up years?"; "Tell me about your family."; "What types of activities did you enjoy as a child?" Because the intent of the initial interview was to

build a “focused life history” (Seidman, 1991, p. 11), the questions were directed to solicit information about past events leading up to their present participation in cheerleading. The interview format, though directed toward past athletic involvement and interests, gave each individual the opportunity to tell her own personal story in her own unique way. As the session progressed, the interviewee steered the conversation to those events, relationships, and activities that were personally significant to her. At that point, I followed her lead, gently guiding and redirecting if we got bogged down in any one area too long.

The second interview dealt with the cheerleading experience itself. Questioning usually began with, “How did you get involved with cheerleading?” or “What attracted you to cheerleading?” The questioning was designed to get as much data as possible about how the activity of cheerleading was experienced and how participating in cheering fit in with other aspects of present day life. The following are examples of other types of questions asked during the second interview session:

What was the first day of practice like?

What is it about cheerleading that makes it so inviting for you at this time in your life?

What do you see is the primary function of the squad?

What was competition like for you?

What is it like being the newest member?

What were some of your thoughts when you heard the term *senior cheerleader*?

How has the squad changed since you first joined?

How long do you see yourself doing this?

Again, questions during the second session were customized to reflect the individual's longevity on the squad and/or unique position (captain). There was generally some overlap from the first to the second session as interviewees often referred to past events or experiences that were relevant to some aspect of cheering that was being discussed at the time. The second session also served to fill in any gaps from the first session or clarify any questions regarding the previously collected data.

The third and final interview was a time for reflecting on the meaning of their participation in cheering and how that participation fit into the bigger scheme of life, their attitudes toward aging, and other personal beliefs and philosophies. Participants were asked to reflect on their lives as a whole from past to present to determine how their participation in cheerleading made sense and continued to make sense for them. This was the meatiest of the sessions in terms of getting at the significance of athletic involvement for each of them, personally. One of the questions during this session had to do with a question that their coach had asked them prior to the state competition. The coach's purpose in asking the pointed question was to prepare them for competition and to motivate them to perform their very best. It had the overall effect of a pep rally. The question seemed very appropriate for this session. I asked them to reflect on what the coach had asked earlier and how they would respond now to the question, "What is your inner purpose for being a cheerleader?" The responses were quite interesting and will be shared in the next chapter.

### Group Interview

The group interview was conducted prior to competition and could also have served as a pep rally or a team huddle before going into the big game. The group was asked to respond to the words of their cheer, line for line. They were asked what these lines really meant to them, individually, and as a group. The name of the cheer was *Senior Spirit*. The cheer is presented below:

We want to hear that senior spirit

Let's hear it, seniors; let's hear it, spirit! (twice)

SP-IR-IT

Spirit, let's cheer it.

Come on, seniors; let's hear it, spirit! (twice)

Rub a dub dub; Put'em in the tub

Wash them, scrub them, hang 'em on the line

Hanging with the seniors, that's mighty fine.

Stand up. Get on your feet.

And move to that senior beat (three times)

We, we got it. Seniors, we got it.

We, we got it.

Got that beat. It's in our feet. Got that B-E-A-T beat. Yea.

During the group interview, the cheerleaders were asked to respond to the following questions: "What is the senior spirit? What does it mean to cheer "it"? What's it like to hang with the seniors? Who are the seniors? What is the senior beat? What do

seniors have?” The cheerleaders were quite vocal during the taped interview and enthusiastic with their responses. These will also be shared in the next chapter.

### Collaterals

To get a different perspective, I interviewed the gatekeeper and coordinator of the squad who is also the director of senior activity programming for the city and county in which the study was conducted. I interviewed the cheerleading coordinator on two different occasions. The first interview was on May 13, 2003. The second followed two weeks later. During the interview, I got information about (a) how the group was started; (b) the early history of the group; (c) the role of the coordinator; (d) descriptions of the current members; and (e) the goals and purpose of the group as perceived by the current coordinator.

I also had the privilege of speaking with two of the former cheerleaders. One of these meetings was a spontaneous, untaped interview while the other one was pre-planned and taped. Although the taped interview did not follow the three-session format, the interview lasted well over two hours. This particular interview was with the mother of the founder of the cheerleading squad. Not only did the mother and former cheerleader share her perspectives, but she shared her daughter's as well. During the interview, I was able to watch videotaped footage of the group performing and to discuss briefly with her husband his thoughts about his wife's involvement in cheering.

### Observations

The observations were not as much of a problem as the interviews in terms of scheduling. Observations were made during practice times and during special events and

performances. Practices were held weekly on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons from 1:30 to 3:00. During special occasions and preparation for special events, additional practices were scheduled and held at times other than regular practice times. The observations were divided between an observer perspective and a participant perspective as I actually joined in many of the cheer routines, even performing with the group at four public events.

I observed practices and performances beginning the first week in June, 2003, and continued through the second week in December, 2003. Each practice session and performance was experienced from either an observer's viewpoint or a participant's perspective. During the sessions and events that were observed, notes were taken during the practice. On those occasions when I was actually a participant, I typed up my impressions of the experience as soon after the activity as possible. Immediately following the observation sessions, the observation notes were transcribed into a typed format for later coding.

I participated in four performances as an actual member of the group. One performance was for a church group; one was at a nursing home; one was during a parade; and one was for a local celebrity's roast. The squad participated at various other events that I could not attend due to my work schedule. These were held during the day and included performances for nursing home residents, volunteer groups, birthdays, fund raising events, and grand opening celebrations. The transcribed observations of practices, performances, and special activities were coded and contributed to the analysis of each individual case study and the overall case analysis.

### Document Analysis

Photos, competition programs and related fliers, and two volumes of historical scrapbooks were analyzed for emerging codes and themes. The photos that were not included in the scrapbooks were given to me by the captain of the squad and the member with the most seniority. Two of the pictures were of the original squad; six were of more recent members involved in area performances. She also brought in a picture of herself and her granddaughter with both of them dressed in their cheerleading uniforms. The grandmother was wearing the uniform of the Wilmington Golden Pom-Pom cheerleaders; the granddaughter wore the uniform of the UNC-W Seahawks. The competition data listed information about Senior Game events and schedules as well as the competing teams of cheerleaders.

Over 200 entries were included in the two volumes of scrapbook history. These artifacts included photos, description of the current squad, history of the squad's origin, fliers and programs related to area performances and activities, state competition information, and thank you letters and cards from community patrons. There were also thank-you notes from members thanking the group for remembering them during times of illness or other hardships. The letters and cards spoke about how the squad had inspired and motivated its audiences.

### Quantitative Measure

Each cheerleader completed the Life Attitude Profile-Revised (Reker,1992) and the Perceived Well-Being- Revised (Reker,1995) assessments in a single sitting. The LAP was based on Viktor Frankl's (1963) will to meaning, which Frankl stated is a universal human motive. According to Frank, the founder of logotherapy, a frustrated will to meaning can lead to an existential vacuum, a condition in which life is perceived as having no meaning or purpose. The original Life Attitude Profile (Reker and Peacock, 1981) consisted of 56 items representing seven factorially derived dimensions- Life Purpose, Existential Vacuum, Life Control, Death Acceptance, Will to Meaning, Goal Seeking, and Future Meaning. The dimensions correspond to Frankl's logotherapeutic constructs of will to meaning, existential vacuum, personal choice and responsibility, realities and potentialities, and death transcendence. Each of the 56 items was rated on a seven point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

The revised version consists of 48 items rated on a seven point Likert scale. The LAP-R has six dimensions and two composite scales. The six dimensions measured are Purpose, Coherence, Choice/Responsibility, Death Acceptance, Existential Vacuum, and Goal Seeking. The composite scales are Personal Meaning Index and Existential Transcendence. The last revision was made in order to provide a more operationalized measure of personal meaning. The Personal Meaning Index measures personal meaning in terms of life goals, mission in life, having a sense of direction based on past, present, and future events, and a consistent understanding of self, others, and life in general. Existential Transcendence is a global measure of life attitudes in terms of discovering

life's meaning and purpose and the "motivation to find meaning and purpose" (Reker, 1992; p. 20).

The Perceived Well-Being Scale-Revised (Reker, 1995) consists of 14 items designed to assess psychological, physical, and general well-being. Eight of the items measure physical well-being while six items measure psychological well-being. The composite score of the two subscales are reported to provide an index of overall perceived well-being (Reker & Wong, 1984). Psychological well-being is defined as the presence of positive emotions (happiness, joy, contentment) and the absence of negative emotions (fear, anxiety, depression). Physical well-being is based on perceived health and vitality and absence of physical discomforts. Each of the 14 items is rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A score of 7 for all 14 items is equated to a high level of well-being. Scores between 6 and 42 indicate psychological well-being; scores from 8 to 56 reflect physical well-being; scores from 14 to 98 are indicative of general well-being.

Reker and Wong (1984) gave the PWB to a sample of 238 community and institutionalized older adults. The internal consistency of each dimension was computed by Armor's Theta (as cited in Reker & Wong, 1984) and theta coefficients of .82 and .78 were obtained for psychological and physical well-being and .91 for general well-being. Reliability coefficients were .79 ( $p < .001$ ) for psychological well-being; .65 ( $p < .001$ ) for physical well-being; and .78 ( $p < .001$ ) for overall well-being.

The revised version of the PWB has 16 items instead of 14. The additional two items were added under the psychological dimension so that both dimensions now

contain eight items each. Scores between eight and 56 indicate well-being in both the psychological and physical dimensions. For the composite index, scores between 16 and 112 reflect overall well-being. Alpha coefficients were .74, .85, and .86 for psychological, physical, and general well-being, respectively. Each of the 16 items were rated on a 7 point Likert scale.

The testing administration took approximately 30 minutes with most of the participants completing in less time. The assessment was not timed. The group completed the profiles in a classroom setting at the Senior Center prior to their regularly scheduled practice session. Each participant was asked to write her initials on the assessment for identification purposes. These instruments were used to assess the subjective psychological well being of participants and their attitudes towards life satisfaction and life meaning and purpose. The results will be shared in the next chapter.

### Data Analysis

#### Introduction

According to Glesne (1999), data analysis “involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read so that you can make sense of what you have learned” (p.130). Stake (1995) believes that “there is no particular moment when data analysis begins” (p. 71) as analysis involves assigning meaning to “first impressions as well as to final compilations” (p. 71). Patton (1990) described the process of data analysis as a formidable “challenge to make sense of massive amounts of data, reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns, and construct a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal” (p. 371-372). Wolcott (1994) saw the overall

challenge of qualitative research, particularly for novice researchers, as not so much “how to get data but how to figure out what to do with the data they get.” Such was my dilemma.

Rubin and Rubin (1995) reported that for “each hour you spend interviewing, you end up with 10,000 words to understand”. (p.227). Using these statistics and basing them on 38.5 hours of interviews, I ended up with approximately 385,000 words to understand, not to mention the words associated with document analyses, field notes, and analytic memos. My data analysis actually did begin in the field during the process of collecting data through such activities as (a) reviewing field notes; (b) writing memos; (c) listening to recorded interviews; (d) developing rudimentary coding systems; (e) and continuously reflecting on each new piece of information to see how it fit in with existing data. The data were sorted into interviews, documents, and observation and stored in computer files for easy access. Hard copies of transcripts, observation notes, and analyses of historical documents such as scrapbooks and videos were retrieved from the files and coded. Although the data analysis began in the field by continuously incorporating new pieces of data, the more formal analysis began primarily after the field work was completed.

Wolcott (1994) broke data analysis down into three parts--description, analysis, and interpretation. He used the term “transformation of qualitative data” (p. 10) to encompass all three components and to refer to the broader, more general use of the word *analysis*. He felt that the term data analysis was too loosely used and not specific enough to address the specificities of the formal or systematic approach to analyzing data. Wolcott referred to data analysis as a subset under the bigger umbrella of analysis and

defined it as those “systematic procedures followed in order to identify essential features and relationships” (p. 24) in the data. He offered ten strategies or procedures for data analysis:

1. Highlight your findings by...looking at some things rather than others.
2. Display your findings [through graphic organizers, tables, diagrams, matrices].
3. Follow and report “systematic” fieldwork procedures.
4. Flesh out whatever analytical framework guided the data collection.  
[i.e. content analysis, discourse analysis]
5. Identify patterned regularities in the data.
6. Compare with another case.
7. Evaluate (i.e. compare with a standard).
8. Contextualize in a broader analytical framework [ i.e. theoretical, literature review].
9. Critique the research processes. [Consider process as well as content.]
10. Propose a redesign for the study. [Examine conceptualization, techniques, inadequate data]. (p. 29-35)

I will attempt to present the data analysis portion of the study in light of Wolcott’s strategies. I did not adhere to all ten. The strategies are not presented in linear fashion; nor are all the categories represented.

### Fieldwork Procedures

Access to the study participants- members of the senior cheerleading squad--was gained by contacting the Senior Activities Coordinator by phone and arranging a meeting which, in fact, turned out to be a recorded interview session. It took about three weeks to actually speak to the Coordinator after leaving several messages at her office. Her office was actually a field office away from the main city complex. She was the only employee housed in the field office which was located at a city park. Since her job involved planning and doing activities with seniors at the senior center or at local parks and rec centers, she was rarely in her office. I finally contacted her on her cell phone, after obtaining the number from another city employee. I eventually learned that the coordinator had been out of town for a week with seniors who were participating in athletic tournaments. She was very cooperative and seemed eager to support the study.

Prior to that initial meeting, I had faxed a cover letter and a copy of the informed consent to the coordinator and asked her to share this information with the cheerleaders to see if they were indeed willing to participate. (See Appendix A for the cover letter document.) The coordinator had assured me over the phone that the ladies would be delighted to participate because they enjoyed all the publicity. They were quite used to being interviewed by the local media and were recently interviewed for and included in a book, *Cheerleading: An American Icon* by Natalie Adams and Pamela Bettis (2003). The book was not available for purchase until after the fieldwork portion of the study was concluded.

After the initial meeting with the coordinator, I received permission to attend practice sessions. I began my fieldwork observations the first week of June, 2003, at the beginning of summer break. During the first practice, I met all the cheerleaders and told them a little bit about myself and what I was doing. I provided copies of the cover letter and the informed consent for each member. (See Appendix B for a copy of the informed consent document.) Some signed the form right away; others wanted to take it with them and bring it back later. I respected their preferences. The cheerleaders were very warm and welcomed me into their world with no apparent reservations. From the beginning of June through the end of October, I attended practice sessions two times a week as well as attending any special practices held prior to upcoming performances. During the month of November and into December, I participated with the cheerleaders at special practices and performance.

Initially, I started out as a research observer but became a participant after about three weeks into my fieldwork. Because of my size, I was asked to become the top of the pyramid, standing on the thighs of two of the cheerleaders who formed the base. According to the team captain, the squad had been looking for someone with the right build to assume that position. I thought the study would be richer by having the insider perspective in a very real way. This participation was also intended to build rapport with the team members and help them feel at ease during the interview portion of the study.

I started scheduling interviews after observing two practice sessions. I did not foresee the challenge that I would face in trying to schedule the three individual interviews with the five cheerleaders or the group interview. Getting everyone together at

the same time for practice was often a challenge, even for the coordinator. Trying to accommodate their needs was important in maintaining the relationship throughout the study and on into the future after the study was completed. Working around travel and other athletic events and activities proved quite challenging. Another factor in scheduling was convenience. Interviews needed to be scheduled on practice days, either before or after practice since the participants had already allotted those days and times for cheerleading.

#### Highlight Findings/Analytical Framework

In the analysis of transcript material, observations, video and scrapbook documents, I tended to focus on or highlight those aspects that dealt with meaning, perceptions, and interpretations of experiences related to involvement in cheerleading, related aspects of senior life, relevant past experiences, and future goals. I was interested in how each cheerleader experienced her current involvement in cheering and how past pathways brought her to her current level of activity. I concentrated, too, on those areas that would help me understand how philosophies and beliefs about life in general and aging that were associated with past and present athletic participation. I also focused on the emotional arena and tried to understand how the cheerleaders experienced their lives on an emotional level.

The analytical framework guiding the data collection was primarily analytic coding. Glesne (1999) refers to analytic coding as “a progressive process of sorting and defining and defining and sorting those scraps of collected data” (p. 135). My scraps of data were direct experience, observation notes, analytic memos, documents, and

interview data. Part of the sorting process involves coding as a method of reducing data into manageable portions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Before coding could occur, the taped interviews were transcribed into hard copies and any hand written field notes were typed. I personally transcribed each interview fully, word for word. In one instance, a part was inaudible and that passage had to be filled in by the particular participant who was interviewed. The transcripts were unedited and included various parenthetical phrases such as *you know, kind of, uh, how do I say this, and what do you call it*. After listening to the tapes and reading the transcriptions, I noticed that at various points in the interview, I began to follow the same conversational pattern as the person I was interviewing. I seemed to be aligning my vocabulary and expressions with those of the individual to whom I was talking. For example, if the interviewee responded with a repertoire of you-knows, I fell into the same response pattern. I was not aware of this particular phenomenon until I heard my voice on tape and read my words in print. Though excruciatingly time consuming, hearing and rehearing the interviews helped me become intimately familiar with the interview data. Part of the scrutiny of the transcribed interviews included *member checking*, a process that allowed the participants to also review the transcripts for accuracy and to make any necessary corrections (Stake, 1995).

Glesne (1999) recommended these initial steps in the coding process: reading through the data, identifying what may be important, and giving it a name or code. The transcripts, observation notes, and document analyses were read and re-read, searching for words and phrases related to perceptions of self and others, perspectives on aging and

athletic involvement, significance of cheerleading, philosophies/beliefs about life, and emotional barometers. An independent coder, a colleague and friend, was involved in authenticating the coding process. The friend was a former classmate: We had taken a qualitative research class together, so our training in data analysis was very similar. She was not very familiar with my study, only what we had discussed in class and by e-mail. She knew that it involved aging and athletics.

Copies of encoded transcripts were e-mailed to my friend for her perspectives on potential codes and recurring themes. She entered her thematic impressions and coding comments on those portions of the interview that included recurring patterns or meaningful passages. Although our analytic approaches were somewhat different, there was general agreement on our coding efforts. Emerging codes were family, faith, personality characteristics, self-perceptions, activities, relationships, emotions, perceptions of aging. The use of an independent coder helped in refining the analysis process and served as a system of checks and balances in enhancing the trustworthiness of the research.

After consulting with my friend, the following major codes were assigned to the interview data: Family, Faith, Relationships, Perceptions of Self, Perceptions of Others, Inner Purpose/Meaning, Emotional Outlook, Life Beliefs/Philosophies, Attitudes toward Cheering, Attitudes toward Aging, Background, Personal Characteristics, Interests, Activities, Pathways to Present, Significant Events, Goals. Some sub codes emerged, such as senior advocacy and advice for rising seniors, under Attitudes toward Aging. Under Emotional Outlook, emotions were categorized as positive or negative. The code

Attitudes toward Cheering was broken down into sub codes of confidence, competence, reason or motive for involvement, benefits of cheerleading, contributions to community, leadership issues, relational issues, and relatedness of cheerleading to other areas of life.

#### Patterned Regularities/Cross-Case Analysis

Patton (1990) stated that the first step in analyzing interviews is to decide whether to approach it on a case by case basis or begin with cross-case analysis. He warns against using both methods simultaneously as this could create confusion. He suggested starting with one or the other of the approaches and it didn't really matter which was used first. Both approaches were used but not simultaneously. I first began with individual case analysis searching for patterns and themes within each case and then moved on to look for recurring themes across cases. For example, activity, involvement, connectedness, perseverance, resilience, encouragement, advocacy, and accommodation were found to be recurring themes within individual cases and across the five case studies.

#### Conceptualization in Broader Analytical Framework

The study's conceptual framework was nestled in the theoretical frameworks of Kelly's personal construct theory, Frankl's logotherapy, and Kegan's theory of the evolving self. These three theories deal with personal meaning in terms of how individuals perceive themselves and their relationship to the external world around them. Data collection and data analysis were focused on understanding personal meanings, perceptions, and interpretations of life events, relationships, and self. While not the primary focus, analysis also involved determining the fit of the framework by examining instances in the data that tended to support the applicability of these particular theories.

### Evaluate/Critique

This section tends to be associated with research limitations and references to validity issues, so these will be discussed here. The standard for evaluating the research was existing phenomenological research and Seidman's model for conducting phenomenological research. As previously stated, the time frame of the interviews did not directly correspond to Seidman's, due to scheduling issues with the participants. Rather than a two to three week interlude, some consecutive interviews had to be scheduled up to five weeks later, due to the travel plans of the individuals involved. Catherine, in particular, was out of town quite frequently during the summer. This was her time frame for travel so I needed to work around that. She traveled to California to visit her family out there and stayed several weeks. Rose traveled to Indiana for a few weeks. Dollie traveled to Tennessee. Corky traveled to Florida, Tennessee, and made several trips within the state over the course of the summer months. Other events that needed to be accommodated were tennis and badminton practices and tournaments, table tennis practices, and a bridge tournament. Often the cheerleading performances themselves or extended cheering practices would preclude the interviews.

To compensate for the gaps between interviews, I used the first few minutes of each interview to summarize what had transpired in the previous interview, clear up any discrepancies, and describe the intent of the current interview session. In listening to the recorded interviews, this provided continuity for me and helped me put the interview in context of what else was going on in the life of the cheerleader at that particular time. For example, Catherine was undergoing some medical testing during the time period of one

our interview sessions. We were able to briefly touch on that area and bring that into the context of cheerleading and other activities, concerns, and interests that she had at that particular time. Rose's third interview was conducted after competition so this gave us an excellent opportunity to explore what her first competition was like and the significance of that aspect of cheerleading related to other areas of her life.

Another limitation of the study, or more of a validity issue, was the time lapse between conducting the interviews and actually transcribing the interviews. The task of transcribing was extremely time consuming, and I did not always plan accordingly for the amount of time actually involved from interview to finished copy. Balancing work and other obligations often put me behind schedule in my transcription efforts. I could have hired a transcriptionist to facilitate turn around time; but, being personally involved with the data, hearing and re-hearing the tapes, reproducing the words in print, and continually reflecting on what I was hearing and seeing, to me, was worth the effort and actually enhanced my understanding of the participants' words. Being in continuous contact with the group helped fill in any memory lapses caused by transcript delay and kept the experience in context. Seeing the cheerleaders regularly and having easy access to them by phone helped keep the interview data fresh and in clear focus despite the lag. In other studies of this nature with less accessibility to participants, transcribing issues could become huge threats to validity. In conducting future studies, the time factor involved in transcribing should be addressed in a more manageable manner if possible.

Another possible limitation or threat to validity could be my familiarity with the group. Getting to know them on a more personal level by actually assuming a spot on the

squad may have influenced participants to either limit their responses or to have more freedom in the interview setting. Familiarity may have loosened the structure of the interview. Our interviews tended, at times, to sound more like conversations rather than a traditional interview session. As a counselor by training and by practice, I am very familiar with interview skills and the importance of using open-ended questioning and probing. Asking too many closed-ended type questions that produce either a yes or no response only and using leading questions that may influence the interviewee's responding can impede the collection of authentic and meaningful data.

In some of the interviews, I did find myself using close ended questioning-too many instances of "Do you" and "Did you." This may have been due to my familiarity with the participants and anticipating that they would respond with more than a dichotomous answer. As I became aware of this trend, I was quick to adjust it to a more open ended line of questioning. Some of the questioning could have been considered leading but was done in an attempt to check out the plausibility of a concept or a belief. For example, I asked Esther in our last interview, "Do you see a natural evolvement from some of the things that you've done in the past and the attitudes that you have about past events, do you see that carrying over into cheerleading?" This could be construed as a leading question. (It certainly was an example of multiple questioning.)

Esther's response was, "Oh, yea, I think so.....wanting to participate and carrying it forward is a natural thing to me. If I'm going to be in something, I'm going to be in it. I'm going to do what it takes to make it click, make it go, make it be enjoyable-- something that you want to be in and want to look forward to participating in."

Whether I led Esther into this response and connection, I can't be sure but the information I received regarding her perception of her experience and attitude toward that experience was invaluable. A more structured interview guide, however, may have reduced the number of closed or potentially leading questions. Balancing structure with flexibility in terms of personal expression is a delicate task at best.

### Trustworthiness of Research

I have discussed some of the more obvious limitations of the study. Now, what went right? What was done to protect research validity and reliability? In quantitative research, the standards for judging whether research is “good and convincing” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 85.) have to do with validity and reliability issues. The usual indicators and terms -validity and reliability- typically do not fit qualitative designs (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 1999; Maxwell, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Stake, 1995). Glesne refers to validity as the “trustworthiness of research” (1999, p.32). She listed eight verification procedures often used to enhance trustworthiness: (a) prolonged and persistent observation; (b) triangulation or use of multiple methods of data collection, theoretical perspectives, sources, or investigators; (c) peer review; (d) the use of negative case analysis or disconfirming evidence; (e) addressing researcher bias; (f) member checking; (g) thick description; and (h) external audit. Maxwell (1996) refers to validity as the “correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account” (p. 87). Validity can be threatened by inaccurately or incompletely describing the data; imposing the researcher's meanings rather than

understanding the participant's meanings; or failing to address discrepant information or to consider alternative explanations for the phenomenon (Maxwell, 1996.)

Audiotaped interviews, complete transcriptions, and member checking can help reduce the threat to validity regarding description inaccuracy. Using open-ended questioning and avoiding the use of close-ended and leading questioning can reduce interpretation error. Including negative cases and disconfirming evidence addresses validity issues related to theory.

Glesne recognized that all eight procedures for enhancing trustworthiness may not be necessary or evident in one study alone. The procedures that were used in the present study with senior cheerleaders addressed several of the validity issues described by Glesne and Maxwell. I engaged in persistent and prolonged engagement and observation by spending seven months in the field from May to December. The first interview with the coordinator was held on May 13. While the last interview with the cheerleaders was completed on October 7, the field work continued until December 13 and concluded with a performance at a Christmas parade. Triangulation through multiple methods of data collection and the use of multiple theoretical perspectives provided another way to enhance trustworthiness. The use of peer review helped to reduce interpretation errors. Fully transcribing audiotaped interviews and subjecting the transcripts to member checking helped to reduce threats to description validity in terms of inaccurate or incomplete data. I was aware of my own biases related to my father's aging experience and my own philosophies and attitudes about aging and tried to be cognizant of those while interacting with other seniors. Interpretation validity was addressed by structuring

the interview format to include more open-ended questions and to use active listening skills to reflect meaning as well as content of interview responses. Following Seidman's model helped to ensure that each participant had the opportunity to tell her own personal story. In each subsequent interview, what was previously said was checked against the current information to strengthen internal consistency. My experience as a licensed professional counselor and a practicing school counselor for 14 years has helped sharpen my interview skills as well as the ability to establish and build rapport with interviewees. My competence lies in being a well trained and seasoned professional counselor. The experience of the researcher, then, contributed to research trustworthiness by the use of more open-ended questioning than closed, by the conscious effort to restrain from the use of leading questions, and focused listening with respect to emotion and meaning as well as content.

### Ethical Concerns

Each participant, whether an active or a former cheerleader, signed an informed consent prior to participation in the study. The consent form addressed the need to audio tape interviews as part of the participation agreement. The cover letter addressed the purpose of the study and described the researcher's background. The consent form specified that the anonymity of the cheerleaders would be protected during the course of the study. See Appendix B for the informed consent document. This condition was probably not necessary as the cheerleaders have appeared numerous times in the media and in several publications, including a new book about cheerleading that was released in October, 2003.

Adhering to the research agreement, pseudo names were given to each participant to be used in communicating their stories to the readers. The cheerleaders were invited to submit their own cover name. Only one chose a name and that name was used in the write up. The other names were the product of the researcher's creativity.

### Reciprocity

There was never any mention of reimbursement or that the participants of the study would get anything in return. They were very cooperative and seemed genuinely interested in participating in the study because they liked helping people out and were generally accustomed to doing so. After the interviews were completed, I did present each cheerleader a special gift as my way of showing gratitude for their participation and their hospitality and as a congratulatory gift for winning first place in the state level cheering competition. At their victory celebration the week after they returned, I presented them all with their own personalized tote bag. They were cranberry, trimmed in antique gold and matched their uniforms perfectly as they were ordered from the same manufacturing company where the uniforms were purchased. Each bag was inscribed with the cheerleaders' first name and Wilmington Cheerleader. The ladies were delighted.

## Chapter 4

### **RESULTS**

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the participant specific themes first, followed by common themes found across the individual cases. I have chosen to present the cheerleaders' stories in a profile format using the words of the participants. Seidman (1991) recommends that the "crafting of a profile or a vignette of a participant's experience is an effective way of sharing interview data" (p.91). He believes that presenting the interview data in this manner is more consistent with the interview process and provides a more accurate reflection of the person's own consciousness of the experience. He emphasized that "telling stories is a compelling way to make sense of interview data" (p. 92).

The individual profiles are based on data gathered over the course of the three interview sessions. Learning about past life events and the paths each cheerleader took to becoming involved with cheerleading is important in understanding the role of athletics in later life and the personal meaning that cheerleading has for each of them. When placed in the context of their lives overall, their participation in cheerleading becomes more meaningful. Instead of their actual names, I used pseudonyms in order to protect the identity of each individual cheerleader. I also used pseudonyms for significant others that were named in the passages.

Following the presentation of the individual members of the squad, I have crafted a profile of the cheerleading squad itself. Just as each individual cheerleader contributes

to and constitutes the squad, the team profile is representative of the individual and collective profiles of the team members. The squad is made up of five individuals who bring certain commonalities to the team, as well as certain areas of uniqueness. The squad profile reflects the role of senior athletics in terms of individual specificities and those aspects of participation that are common to the group as a whole. The common themes related to athletic participation and other perspectives of aging are presented in the team profile. The team profile was based on interview data, observation, participation, and document analysis.

The idea for first presenting the individual cheerleaders, followed by the team presentation, came from the cheerleaders themselves. They related that one of the most powerful cheer routines for themselves and their audiences, involved the singular introduction of each cheerleader as a way of showcasing the entire senior squad. Each cheerleader steps forward, takes her cheerleading stance, and states her name and her age. The stance may include performing a cartwheel or a split, standing on her head, jumping, kneeling, or standing with hands on hip. The individual introductions served to highlight the individuality of the group members and their commonality as well. The cheerleaders shared that they were proud to give their ages, and that their audiences were astonished and amazed that seniors could do the stunts and moves generally associated with younger athletes.

The crafted individual profiles, then, serve as the basis for introducing each cheerleader to the readers. My intent here is to communicate to the reader the unique talents and strengths which each cheerleader brings to the group, as well as to convey to

the audience each cheerleader's personal purpose for belonging to the squad. The profiles feature the individual pathways that led to participation in senior athletics. Some of the pathways are surprisingly similar. Certain life themes or life threads, a type of internal consistency, are depicted in the life stories of the cheerleaders. The themes tend to be related to the significance of cheerleading in each of their lives. The squad profile presents the individual elements in a unified fashion, highlighting the commonalities of purpose as well as the uniqueness of personality, all coming together to form a senior gold medal team.

In trying to remain "faithful to the words of the participants" (Seidman, 1990, p. 93), I bracketed those words which were my own and used ellipses to indicate any omissions in the participants' words. I added words sparingly in order to create smoother transitions between passages. For the most part, I eliminated the use of such idiosyncrasies as "you know", "uhm", and "ah" to create a clearer and more flowing monologue. I added the word laugh in parentheses to indicate those occasions that participants laughed while relaying portions of their stories. The nonverbal responses were included to communicate more clearly the personal meanings behind the participants' responses and to better understand the context in which their words were used.

Generally, I tried to follow the order in which the material was presented in the interview sessions. I did occasionally present material out of sequence, either within the interview session itself or across interview sessions. Although each of the three interview sessions focused on a particular aspect of the individual's experiences, there was

considerable overlap of interview material in many of the cases. For example, information in interview three may be related to that presented in interview one, or interviews one and two may contain similar material. In those cases, where interview material was exchanged, I was careful to protect the integrity of the participants' words and the context in which they were used. When possible, I tried to maintain the chronological order of the events as described by the cheerleaders. I included section headings to provide greater clarity and emphasis and to break longer passages into smaller ones for easier reading.

The life stories of the five cheerleaders are presented through the following crafted profiles. The profiles are broken into specific categories such as childhood experiences, experiences related to family life, areas of interest, cheerleading experience, and basic life philosophies related to these experiences. Summaries are presented at the conclusion of each individual profile to highlight the thematic connections observed in the passages.

### Wilmington Says Hello: Meet the Cheerleaders

#### Busy Dolli

Dolli! 75!

#### ***Childhood Experiences: "It Was Fun."***

Recently I went back to my home place in Tennessee. We walked around and it was fun to go back. The town I grew up in, it just missed being the capital of Tennessee by one vote. Our farm was surrounded... by Red River. When I was six years old, I remember riding a pig. In fact, my children and grandchildren just

recently found a picture of me riding [the] pig. And they thought that was so funny. So when we went back to the same place, they asked me. They said, “Is this where you rode that pig?” My brother had a calf he rode.

I am the youngest of four [children]. I have two sisters and a brother. We just had a fun time [growing up]. They always found out the jokes and that kind of thing. They passed them on to me and I didn't have anybody to tell them to. [I was a] very active child. We had a spring down by the river and we would make our way down there and get spring water and jump in the spring. And we swam in the river. We just did all the fun things....My daddy had all kinds of swings. Like porch swings, extra swings in the yard. We had grape vines that we swang out. [Those were happy times.] I still have those happy times. I play all day, every day.

It was fun [growing up on the farm.] We had three families of black people and there was one little girl my age and we played together all the time. Her mother did a lot of cooking for us and I thought everything she cooked was grand. I thought it was better than anything that was cooked at my house. (Laugh). We had a lot of neighbors. We had one neighbor that bordered our farm that grew watermelons. And I asked my daddy why he couldn't grow them that good and he said because he didn't drink enough. (Laugh). Mr. [Melvin] drank a lot.

I guess it was when I started high school that farming went out and my daddy.....helped build Fort Campbell. He was a foreman at Oak Ridge [too]. He was a foreman, and he said people would tell him they were a carpenter and they

couldn't drive a nail. He was always good [at] building. He built our stable and granary. In fact he built our house [that] burned down when I was two. I don't remember anything about that, but my older brother and sisters do. My grandfather was a senator in Tennessee back in the teens, so we had like a 15-room house and then.....it burned. And then my daddy built it back. But it wasn't nearly as big. (Laugh). My daddy looked after [my grandparents] as they got older and that's why he got the home place.

We went to a two teacher school. One teacher had the 1<sup>st</sup> through the 3<sup>rd</sup> grades and then the other teacher had the others. Now [people] think that children have to have the best teacher from day one. You still make out even if you don't have that good [of an] education. Like my brother's class, [there were] either two or four in the class. As they got on up, some people took them out of school to work the farms. We didn't have [extra-curricular activities]. We had recess and played on the playground. Like playing ball or on seesaws and that kind of stuff.

....We walked to school. [It] must have been two miles. [When I] tell my grandchildren about that, they [think], "That's terrible." And we walked to church on Sunday. Every Sunday. We had a preacher in the county and they would have four to five churches. They would go preach maybe at one at night, another at, maybe at 9:00 and another at 10:00, and another at 11:00.

....My daddy never told us until I got in 1<sup>st</sup> grade or 2<sup>nd</sup> grade [that my grandfather was a senator]. My teacher was looking up some history stuff and she showed us the history book with his picture in it. I came home bragging about it

and my daddy says, “You don’t brag about something like that. What you should be proud of was that he was known as an honest senator.” He started out as a teacher and principal and then he went on to various offices until he got to be a senator. My daddy said that he and his brothers never got to their potential like his daddy did.

....After 8th grade, we rode the big yellow buses to the high school in the city. Some of them [there] thought we were real country bumpkins but it didn’t bother me at all really. I played basketball, and then they didn’t turn the children loose to do what they wanted to. [We] played half court. They didn’t think the girls were strong enough [to play full court]. I played on [the girls’ team].

***Education: “Just Taking the Classes I Enjoyed”***

[After four years of high school,] I went to the local college. In college we had a swimming pool. So, I took a life saving thing....I thought it was great to have a pool; when I was a child we swam in the river. I went to college for two years. Then I took some classes here (at UNCW). I never did get my degree but I guess I probably would be at the end of, I guess, my junior year. I would take history and english and some of that because I knew I should have it and biology, but ...mostly, when I started in college, I took home [economics] because I knew I could make all my clothes. I had a good teacher but she told me after I made my first article that I could make anything I needed to. I really didn’t [need the class] but I needed the time and the use of the room while I was on campus. So that’s what I did and she had a lot of fashion shows and that was fun.

I just wanted all through [college] to take the classes I enjoyed. [Like] arts and crafts and home [economics]

***Activities/Interests: “Balancing Quiet... and ...Activity”***

I started making my clothes when I was in grade school. My mother sewed. She made all my clothes. ....We made them out of feed sacks you’d buy grain in and they had flowered material. I always had lots of comments [on them]. Some of them were pretty wild. I still make.... all my dress clothes. Like Easter and Christmas. I make my grandchildren’s dresses. [Sewing] is something that you really have to enjoy or you don’t ever do that well with. It’s something that I always enjoyed doing. And I always liked being different. I didn’t like things everybody else had. And I knew if I made them, I’d never have any like anybody else. I still like to be different. I don’t try to put myself in any mold. When my daughter was playing tennis [in high school] and [in college], they wanted me to do dresses because I made all her tennis dresses and they liked them and she said, “Why doesn’t your mother make them?” ....She said, “No, I want to be different.” (Laugh). So she wanted hers to look better than everybody else’s. (Laugh).

....I knitted for years. When I was a child, my aunt always knit us mittens for Christmas. I just thought that was great, and so, when I was old enough to start to learn how to knit, I asked her about it....She says, “Now, I’ll help you, but a book will help you and you can learn from that” and I did. I found a book and kind of

looked at the pictures...I never did use the guide sheet. I would look at the pictures and figure it out.

....I play duplicate bridge and that's very competitive. I've been in that a long time but I think you need some quiet things and then some activity. The ones that do bridge that do not do any activity think it's so intense.

....Tennis has always been my first love. I learned that, this friend of mine, really, we learned between 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. All one summer. We decided we were going to learn to play tennis. We taught ourselves. On a clay court which was like dirt. My uncle had a big lot and he had a tennis court in his yard [that] I actually started on because his children played all the time. And so my cousins really kind of taught me how, to start with. Then [Patty] and I decided we were going to really learn it and we really did. So we worked at it, and that's a sport you can always enjoy all your life. All you have to have is one more person. I stopped [playing] while I had the children. I didn't play much but it's something that you can pick back up any time. When I was in college, I took volleyball, badminton, and tennis. (Laugh). [A few years ago,] I went to UNCW and took some [classes] and the first day we went out to play tennis, they all kind of looked at me and after we played the first day, they all wanted to be my partner. It was fun. I've always enjoyed tennis because you can pick it up and go with it awhile. It's not everybody that can play tennis because you have to have the eye coordination with the ball to do it.

***Busy: "I Never Just Sit."***

I have always been active.....I have never been one to sit still. Of course when you have four children....you're busy from morning to late at night. And two of my daughters are just like that. In fact, I think all my children are like that. When they're sitting, they're thinking. The wheels are going around. (Laugh). My son likes to dance five or six nights a week and my brother is the same way. He's two years older than I am and he says a good time is being able to dance at least five nights a week. (Laugh).

I can never sit. Some people can just sit and watch tv. I don't ever do that. If I'm sitting and watching tv, I'm knitting at the same time or doing some sewing. I never just sit.....I've never been used to that. [When I was growing up, we were always] playing games or dancing. Playing cards. My daddy thought [that] everybody should know how to dance and play cards by the time they were two. And we loved dancing and playing cards. We got a victrola. I can remember getting it. I was five or six and we would roll back the rug and dance. [My daddy] would dance with us. He called it the shuffle and the two step. It was kind of ....just the basic dance. I don't think Mom ever danced with us. [Daddy] would get up and dance with all of us and neighbors would come in; [it was] out in the country.

[My daddy] was busy all the time. [He was] a farmer and [he] worked hard....and really didn't have that much time. But [dancing] was something that he enjoyed. [It] was relaxing to him.... At night, if he was there and he had a little

time, he might play checkers. Chinese checkers and other checkers. He would play games with us.

### ***Family Life***

...[My Dad] never got mad. [He used the same tone forever.] [My father was about 80 when he died.] My mother died [when] she was 51 which was a young age. [When my mother died, I was [between grade school and high school. That was a hard time. They both had lung problems. My daddy smoked back then which he shouldn't have....His daddy was very much against any of his boys smoking and [Daddy said] every one of them did.

....I married [my high school sweetheart]. We were in high school together. He went on to college and worked his way through. He went [here locally] for two years and then ...to the University of Tennessee. We got married in [1950] and our first child was born in [1954]. [A little girl]. After college, we went to Rochester, New York. [My husband] was an engineer. He worked for Kodak there and, then it was too cold, so we flew back to Tennessee. (Laugh). He went with an engineering firm and then with Dupont. I wanted four children and I was lucky to get four. We wanted [them] four years apart but then the last one was one year [apart]. The two girls. And they're almost like twins.

I stayed home with them and did everything for them. I made all their clothes. [I didn't work] after I started having children. I was a secretary when I did work. [My children] enjoyed each other and that's one thing about moving places. When you move children every couple of years, they really do better if you have more

children than if you have one. Usually if you have one child and you move often, they don't do well. They had each other, so when they moved they had each other. Working for Dupont you can count on moving every two years. I didn't enjoy moving that often. You had to think about getting new doctors, new schools.

***Mid-Life Crisis: "An Old Man with a Younger Woman"***

[My husband] is retired now and lives in Delaware. We were married for 31 years and then he got interested in someone younger. [We were living here at the time]. [He went through] a mid-life crisis. You hear about [that] with some men. For awhile you blame yourself and then you finally get so, "Well, it wasn't me." When they get someone younger's attention they think it makes them younger, but it really doesn't. It's just an old man with a young girl....It took about five years before I felt like I ever wanted to look at another man. It took a long, long time. One reason that it turned out as well as it did was that I had worked his way through school. And that's the reason I got as much alimony as I did.

....[My children were already grown so it left a big void when we divorced.] You have to be busy at that time or else you'd fold under. We squared danced [together] for 30 years....We danced two to three times a week. He met this girl at square dancing. I didn't square dance for a long time until I found somebody to dance with.... [I am dancing right now.]....A man lost his wife and wanted to come back dancing, and he wanted someone to dance with. If you don't have some other interests, you'd go crazy. I was still playing tennis and playing duplicate bridge.

There for about five years it was really tough. If I hadn't had tennis and bridge to go to, I wouldn't have made it. That and the church. [I] always went to church. We're lucky if we have the church.....And family. [I have a big family]. We've always had a family reunion and [this year] was the 82<sup>nd</sup> reunion. [All] the cousins. We have so much fun when we get together. [The reunion] is always in [Tennessee]. We go back there once a year, sometimes twice a year.

[The divorce] took a toll on [my children]. They didn't want [their father] to come visit. They wouldn't talk [to him] on the phone. [You only have] one daddy. You might as well lighten up after awhile but they've never gotten over it. You don't really get over it. I saw him when my oldest grandson graduated. I hadn't seen him since my youngest daughter got married 15 years ago. Of course, he came down for that. I hadn't seen him until my grandson graduated. He [had] married an old woman with money. That was what we all laughed and said when he first started going with her. My children said, "Oh, he's going with that old woman." Later we found out that [that] old woman was my age. (Laugh). He never did marry the younger woman [he was seeing]. They just lived [together] a couple of years. After this young one left him, he wrote a letter about how great I was and this, that, and the other. [It] was too late. I [have] dated off and on. I went with one man five years, another ten. It's been a long time now, but I don't want to get married again.

***Children: “Have Done Super”***

[My children] have done super. [I am very proud of them.] They all got four years of college in 4 years with a B+ or better average. I told them I got through with a B+ average and they should do the same but I’ve put no pressure on them. Two are engineers and two are teachers. One girl is an architectural engineer and one boy is a mechanical engineer. The other two have teaching certificates. The engineer part may have come from my daddy. He could do anything. He could fix any machinery. Everyone came to him to sharpen their saws, to do everything. [And the teaching.] I grew up with both my aunts teaching school. Aunts and uncles. I would say that most of [our family was] in education more than in any other field.

My son has been at the Dupont plant in Richmond almost all his work [life]. He is 46....and has never gotten married. He’s got a side line. He has 19 [instructional] dance tapes on the internet. And he has three exercise tapes....He’s made a bushel of money. He taught himself [to dance]. When he decides he wants to do something, he gets busy and learns it....He’s always known how to make money. He’s not one to sit around and do nothing. [My youngest daughter] had her own [interior decorating] business for a while. Her husband has a good job with the bank and was making enough money that she didn’t have to work. [Her] kids say, “Mama doesn’t do very much.” Looking after a big house and two children. That’s not work? [Both of my older daughters live in Virginia]. [One] is activities director [at] a retirement place for rich people. We have laughed and

said [that] we have never seen anybody that had a job that was made for them like hers. (Laugh).

***Cheerleading: “Fun to Get Involved”***

[My grandson Andy who lives here loves for me to come to his school and cheer.] [I have been a cheerleader for] about 11 years. [Natalie] was the one running the cheerleaders. She was after me and another girl that didn't do it, didn't take it up. She was the one that brought it to my attention that I really might enjoy it. [I had] to think about all the other stuff [I had] going on and should I commit to two days a week. I really enjoyed watching them before and thought it would be fun to get involved. And I thoroughly enjoy it. I was doing the exercises [at the senior center] for awhile but then....you can't do everything. I did the line dancing for about three years. Then I started tap dancing and I had started the cheerleading way back before. I would have loved to [have taken] ballet and tap as a child but it wasn't an option. It was the same way in high school. I really wanted to be a cheerleader but when the big yellow bus rolled out to go home after school you knew you had to be on it and go.

Corky joined about three years before I did. She is really a good leader. She's got the perfect rhythm. [Back] then we had 13 cheerleaders. And we didn't have special practices. I came in and had to try to pick up the things while they were doing it. [I had to] jump in the middle of what they were doing. It was hard to do. Now some people come out and they really can't get it....You have to have kind

of a rhythm and a feel for it. And if you don't have that, you're not going to get it. I know one girl that kind of thought she had it but she didn't. (Laugh).

You have to be dedicated to it and really want to do it. [One lady who used to cheer] really wanted to and really tried....Before she gave it up [for health reasons]....her husband had to put her hose on and get her dressed. [Some people don't join] because it involves two days a week and really for the first year you should come pretty regularly. [Some] felt that they could come whenever they wanted to. It just doesn't work that way. It has to be fun, [too], or else you want keep it up.

...I've enjoyed it. I never was in for just going out and just entertaining. Now some people love to go out and be the center of attention. I like to be involved but as far as going out and having everybody know who I am, it's not my thing. You can pick out people like that in tap dancing. We got one girl that just loves to be [the center of attention]. Some people are that way. And that's fine if they're really good at it, they ought to do it. I enjoy being with a group but as far as going out there by myself and entering a contest, I would not be interested. I enjoy the fellowship of the group and doing what I enjoy.

***Philosophies of Life: "Get a Dog."***

[Cheerleading helps me] stay busy. I just feel like you should be busy. Many people sit at home and they'll say, "Oh, I don't have anything to do." I can't understand people who say that they don't have anything to do. It's there if you didn't have it earlier and you wanted it. It's time to do it. The price is right.

(Laugh). Nobody wants to hear you complain. It's like people who live alone and they say, "I'm just scared to death. I just lock up and I'm scared to death." I say, "Get a dog." But they don't want to get a dog. They say it's too much trouble. They'd rather complain. [I] don't have a lot of time for people who complain. A lot of people really....want somebody to wait on them. Some people just have a lazy attitude. "I don't want to and I don't have to. The world owes me a living." Those kind of people I really don't have much time for.

I think you make your heaven or hell every day. You make your own choices. I read something about [having] the right attitude about life. They say you're going to be happier all your life if you have the right attitude. If you have that negative attitude, it's going to show and it affects your health....and chances are you're not going to have that many friends. People are not going to want to be around that. You're much healthier if you have the right attitude.

Health is the most important thing to me and as long as I feel good and keep going. I see too many people my age in nursing homes. When you can go and perform there and you can leave, you feel really good. And they do love for us to come there to visit. We were over there at Christmas time and they thoroughly enjoyed it. I just hope I can stay on this side. (Laugh). But when the time comes, I hope I won't fight it. Losing your driver's license is the first worse thing you have to face as you get older. Not being able to drive, that's the one big, big thing and once it passes, and it gets to the stage I have to go, I hope I will accept that. Once you go into a nursing home you've lost your independence. I'm sure it's hard to

go with a good attitude but some go with much better attitudes than others. I think going to the nursing homes helps you get kind of prepared. That's one we joke about all the time is picking out our nursing homes while we're [performing for the residents].

I thoroughly enjoy [cheerleading]. And I hope I'm helping other people as well as myself. I think the most things you get into....what you put in it is what you get out of it. I do it because I get a lot out of it myself.... If I just stayed at home and didn't have anything to do, chances are I wouldn't feel good. If you sit around all day and watch tv on the couch and you gain weight and you eat, you're not going to feel that well. But if you get up and go, you just feel better. I've always wanted to be busy.

### Dolli's Life Themes

Fun and play characterized Dolli's life from childhood through adulthood. Dolli grew up on a farm in rural Tennessee. She had very fond memories of her childhood and remembers that period of her life as one of fun, laughter, playfulness, and care-free living. That playful, fun-loving nature of childhood followed Dolli into her adult years and is consistent with her approach to life as a senior adult. Dolli referred to her life, today, in these terms: "I still try to have those happy times. I play all day, every day." As the youngest child of four, she was protected, loved, and well cared for. A true Southern Belle, Dolli's family instilled in her those core values of honesty, responsibility, a sense of justice and fair play, and self reliance. Her father and grandfather were respected leaders and hard workers in their families and community.

Dolli is quite conscientious regarding personal responsibility of self and others. Her interview transcript was generously peppered with “shoulds” and “should nots,” beginning with her father who “shouldn’t have smoked.” She talked about her grandson who was born prematurely and blind. She stated that her son-in-law “should” have sued his wife’s obstetrician for ignoring her concerns regarding the pregnancy. She talked about her own responsibility concerning activity, stating that “I just feel like you should stay busy.”

In discussing the publicizing of senior events, Dolli pointed out that “publicity is one of the main things that has really been lax... we should have more publicity.” She strongly felt that write-ups of senior events “should have been going to the paper and gotten in the paper right away.” Dolli thought that the senior community should do something to recognize those athletes who were now deceased. She stated, “One should get a roster for all those who died that had been in the senior games and have ...something for them; they should have some recognition.”

She expressed concern that senior facilities should be more accessible to seniors in terms of cost and scheduling. She felt that the building that houses senior activities “should be used day and night.” There were economical considerations in the use of senior resources. According to Dolli, “If you heat and cool a building, it should be used.” Another concern was the cost to use the facility. She reported that the square dancing club, of which she is a member, has to pay a fee to use the building: “The price has gone

up... and it's not everybody that can afford this price." Her grandfather's political legacy may have stimulated Dolli's interests in senior advocacy issues. Dolli served on the Senior Advisory Board of the Department of Aging for 6 to 7 years.

Dolli's parents set the family tone for busyness and hard work. Busyness and hard work are themes repeated throughout Dolli's narrative. Her father was a farmer and "he was busy all the time." Dolli acknowledged that her father was a hard worker by her comment, "If you worked as hard as he did, you didn't really have that much time." She appreciated the fact that, although her father was busy, he took time to "play checkers" and to "play [other] games with his children. He also "danced and played cards" with Dolli and her siblings after working long hours on the farm. Dolli's mother died at 51, but Dolli remembers that her mother sewed and made nearly all her clothes. Dolli was well acquainted with the hard work involved in housework and rearing children:

Self-reliance was a theme that also permeated Dolli's life story. Dolli has little tolerance for people who do not take responsibility for themselves. She stated that "some people just have a lazy attitude...[and]...want everything done for them." Dolli's self-reliance was demonstrated by her initiative in teaching herself to knit and to play tennis. She also passed this characteristic on to her children. Dolli prided herself on her independence and being able to take care of herself. She stated that she doesn't mind dining alone and that she "can enjoy my meal as much by myself." When Dolli went shopping and the clerks divided her groceries into smaller bags, Dolli replied, "Load those bags up; I can carry them."

Dolli's humility is characteristic of her father's: He reprimanded Dolli for bragging about her grandfather being a senator. Not interested in "...being the center of attention," she prefers being with part of a group rather than "going out by myself and entering a contest." For Dolli, team goals are placed above individual agendas. Leaders were highly regarded by Dolli: "You've got to respect your leader and go with them; [if] they're doing a good job, you've got to follow them." Dolli was quick to identify the strengths of others, a desirable trait of any cheerleader.

Dolli's natural inclination toward dancing, her high activity level, a self-reliant attitude, her respect for leadership, her sincere appreciation of others, a positive regard for hard work, her high level of commitment, and fun-loving spirit are all attributes that seem well suited to the sport of cheerleading. Dolli's sewing skills and her keen sense of fair play have served the squad well. Her knitted and crocheted creations have won several awards at the Senior Games Silver Arts Competition. Dolli has used her organizational abilities and her desire to "help the next generation" in preserving the squad's history through scrap booking. The two-volume scrapbook contains cheerleading artifacts such as photos, articles, programs, announcements, and various items of correspondence representing the group's history over the last 18 years.

Following her divorce, Dolli's involvement in various activities including tennis, bridge, dance, and cheerleading kept her afloat during this difficult period. When asked to reflect on her inner purpose for participating in cheerleading, Dolli responded: "I thoroughly enjoy it and I hope I'm helping other people as well as myself...because I get a lot out of it....If I just stayed home and didn't have anything to do, chances are I

wouldn't feel good. But if I get up and go, I feel better." Family, church, health, athletics, and activity are important elements in Dolli's busy life.

### Ready Rose

Rose! 77!

#### ***Growing Up: "No, I Didn't Play Basketball."***

[I'm from] Indiana. Yea, I'm a Hoosier. No, I didn't play basketball; I played baseball. Because I'm so tall, everybody asks me that and [I] always say, "No, I didn't play basketball." I went to all the basketball games but I didn't participate. My mother and father had five children and I'm the youngest. I had a very loving family. I don't remember too much about some of the things [in the past]. My mother was 39 when she had me. I had three sisters and one brother. [My brother and two of my sisters have] passed away so that leaves one sister in Ohio and me.

[Being the youngest was okay for me but] for my sister that's still alive it was horrible because she would say to mom, "I don't have to take that snot-nosed kid with me." (Laugh). And she and I never got along. I got along with my other sisters, but she and I were like oil and water. We used to get into fights and my mother had to break us up. She would haul off and slap me in the face and my mother would turn to me. [My mother] knew she couldn't talk to her but she'd say, "Now, [Rose], if you don't argue there won't be a problem. Just don't answer her." So that led to, when I got married and my husband and I were having an argument, I'd [just make a face]. He'd say, "Call me anything you want but don't just stand there looking at me." (Laugh). Oh, [but] I never shut up with my sister.

She was five years older. My brother [was] about 18 months older [than me]....The second to the oldest sister... had a baby when I was four. I was an aunt when I was four....I was very close to my [niece and] nephews. I babysat them. I wasn't too close to my [oldest sister] because of the age difference but later on, when I left there, I got very close to her. She must have been 20 years older. [Her daughter] reminds me so much of her....The things she does, her actions, her hands. The way she keeps house. She is an immaculate housekeeper. Little things that my sister did that she does.

***A Family Trait: "How Tall Are You?"***

My family was tall. My brother was 6'7". He [had] two sons. One's 6'9" and he [had] twins that are six feet [tall]....I don't know if it [bothered] them or not.... One thing I remember saying [to my sister about height], I didn't mean. When I was five, my sister was very tall. We had tickets for the theatre. Her name was called. I said, "I wish I was tall." [And I got my wish.] I was 16 years old when I reached this height [of 6'4"]. When I grew up it... in the 40's, you didn't see too many tall girls. Some girls didn't seem to be that tall. I'd [given] my eye tooth to be built like that. I was the tallest one in my school. Automatically you stood out. I [didn't] want to be noticed. It was very hard on me. I had a very bad attitude. When people said, "How tall are you?", I'd give them snappy remarks, nasty remarks.

One time I got off the ferris wheel with my sister [who was about 5'8"]. I can always feel people looking when I go by them. So we walked by this guy

[looking] and I turned around and said, “Well, don’t you like it?” He said, “I love it. I love it.” My sister said, “See.” Oh, boy. So that’s what they were looking at. (Laugh). I thought they were making fun of me. To this day I get very [defensive]. I’ve tried to overcome it but when a lot of people say, “How tall are you?” I want to say, “Would it make a difference if I told you?” I don’t go around saying, “How much do you weigh?”

I know when I was in school and I was walking down the street and ...saw kids I went to school with, [I’d walk five blocks out of my way] because I didn’t want to pass them....I didn’t want any remarks. That did something [to me]. I went to my mother. She said, “Are you sorry that you were born?” I said, “No.” Then she said, “Stand tall and walk tall.”

I was very timid about my height. I felt I was being made fun of. It sticks with you. I could not accept it and I couldn’t laugh at myself....I said when I got out of high school I was going to move to New York because....everybody would accept it. I was in modeling school and had heels on and some guy walked by me and he goes, “What do you have heels on for? Don’t you think you’re tall enough?” Well, that did it. I took the heels off and I haven’t worn a pair of heels since....It got to me.

### ***Moving On***

....[I actually] left [home] when I was 18 [and] went to Minneapolis where.... I took a course that took me to New York to work with the airlines. I wanted to work in the tower but by then the war was over and...they hired men, so I went

into teletype. I was there a number of years until I got married. We [worked] different shifts....and it was just too much. And then I became pregnant [with my first child] and I had to quit.

....I met my husband at a New Year Eve's party. We worked on the same floor when I worked for the airlines. It was 3 o'clock and I had to be at work at 6:00. I couldn't go home. Instead of lying down.... and sleeping, I found myself talking to him. And he invited me for breakfast and one thing led to another and we started dating. There was something about [Jay]. He quit the airlines...[to do] research [for television]. He worked for Neilson. He treated me very much like a lady and he introduced me to his folks and we got along good. [We got married in] July, 1953.

....We bought a little house. Then we sold that and moved out to the country and bought a bigger house. I became pregnant before we moved in the house. We moved in the house on the 18<sup>th</sup> and I had my second boy on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. I used to take the baby for a ride in the buggy. We'd go in the woods and pick apples, blueberries, and I'd can them. Then all of a sudden, they came around and built a town around [where we lived]. It was now a city, so we moved out. [The move] had a lot to do with [Jay's] drinking. He drank a lot. It got to the point [that] he said, "Well, maybe if we move away, I'll change." ....We moved to the island. My sister had a trailer we lived in a while until we found a place. Then we found a little place we rented.

***“I’ll Never Forget That Night.”***

That old saying “You can take the man out of New York but you can’t take New York out of the man.” He’d go down to the bar. He met this thing 20 years [younger] and he started running around with her. And one thing led to another and it got to the point that I had phoned my mother-in-law in New York. He disappeared for three days. I left. I had nothing to feed the kids. Just soup. I had no water. It was around Christmas. He came marching home....He gave me an alternative. He [wanted] to be with her during the week and come home to me on the weekend. I said, “No. I don’t think so.” I said, “I’m not a snake. I don’t crawl.” It was horrendous.

My son said to me the other day, “Mom, you didn’t know this but I was scared of my dad.” Not that he hit him. And he said, “I’ll never forget the night that we left.” I’ll never forget that night....Jay and I struggled. I had all the Christmas stuff on the couch and he tried to stop me. My little son [was] three and he was hiding, “You can’t find me, mommy.” ....We all ran out behind the house. Jay came out [and left]. I sent my son across the street to call my sister to come and get me. She said they’d be there soon and we had to stay back there. [Jay] came home again and left again. And then all of a sudden my sister and brother-in-law came and got us and I took off running to the house. I grabbed everything and threw it in the car and took off. My sister said, “If you ever go back to him, don’t ask for any of my help.” That was a horrendous night. It still sticks in my mind.

***“Looking after My Kids: I Need Help.”***

....And I never got any help. I tried to go to social services. I raised [my three sons] myself. I worked many hours. I [worked] in a dairy where they milked cows. They sold that out. Now I had to get out. I moved in with my girlfriend. [We] ended up splitting. I lived in Florida awhile....I finally got back to New York. I worked at Macy’s undercover [security]. I had to be at work at 6:00. You worked 8:00 to 4:00 or through to 10:00 for extra money. [I made the boss] mad because I wasn’t going to miss the Macy’s Day Parade....I went over his head. That didn’t set well with him.

....I was unemployed again. I went down to welfare [and told them], “I need help. I’ve got to get a job.” My brother said to me, “[Rose], I love you but you’ve got to get out.” Too many. So that’s when I did a little bit of lying. My son did have asthma. I went to [the] welfare [office] and said, “Look. I slept in the car. My son, listen to him. I’ve got to have help.” That’s when they helped me. They gave me food money. [I got a job] where they make parts for planes. I’d go in at 7:00 in the morning and work from 7:00 to 8:00 cleaning the office and I’d work from 8:00 to 4:30 and then I’d go across the street and work at the hospital from 5:00 to 10:00. I had to look after my kids.

[Later] I went to work for a [place that made] dental equipment. I worked there 17 years until I retired. After I retired, I moved to Wilmington and bought a house. My sons [were down here]. My middle son came down on vacation and loved it. They wanted to get their children out of New York and that fast

environment. He sells ...equipment to put carpet in. And my other son came down and ....went off by himself. He installs carpet. And my middle son came down. He was studying to be a paralegal. But when he came down here, he couldn't find a job. Right now he is a cab driver. Each of my sons has three children. [One of my sons] said to me [once], "Mom, you've done more for me. I wouldn't change a thing about my childhood." That made me feel good. Because I felt I'd done so many things wrong. It takes a lot of courage and energy [to be a parent].

***"I Think It Was Born in Me."***

....I write poems. If something's...cute. Something that happens to someone or a birthday or something, I could sit down and write a poem about it. I don't remember my poems that I wrote. I wrote one about daddies. I wrote one about NASCAR....My girlfriend in New York, she lost her son and I wrote a poem called *Lost Love*. James Whitcomb Riley was my first cousin.

I always wanted to be a singer. I was always singing. I think [music] was born in me. I was in the choir at school. I was in Christmas plays. I loved to sing. I was always singing at my house. I was upstairs singing and singing. (Laugh). The neighbors must have thought, "What's going on?" To this day I love singing but [I didn't] have the lessons to sing. I can carry a tune and I can tell when someone's out of tune [though]. [Singing] was my very first love as long as I can remember. My nephew did [pursue music] and I was so proud of him. He made it but he didn't make it big. He was in Cincinnati [and traveled] around Ohio. He never had the right agent to push him. I don't know whether it was because [my

family] was musical or I just loved it. I... never [went] ahead with my music and at this stage of the game [I don't know] if I could go ahead....but I wonder if I could. I just never pursued it. I...wish I'd pursued that.

...[One sister] played saxophone and my other sister played the banjo.

Another sister and my mother chorded the piano. Both my sisters used to get up to dance. My Dad played the fiddle and my mother chorded on the piano. I was four or five years old [and] I remember my folks would go next door and my Dad would play the jew's harp and my mother would chord on the piano. I always wanted to play an instrument. I started on the piano just chording....myself and then when I got married I took accordion lessons.

***Activity: "I'm Going to Run into Heaven."***

I have always been active all my life. My girlfriend says, "Slow down." I just have always been full of energy. As a child, I did anything and everything. I was into running. I was a runner. I used to run races. Anything with activity. I was always out playing with my kids when I was younger, when they were younger. I'd go sledding with them in the snow. Throw snow balls. I played baseball. I played volleyball. When I was working in a factory, I played 1<sup>st</sup> base in the game. I got into baseball and I got into bowling a little bit. But my bowling didn't start until I moved here [to Wilmington] in '96. I loved the gym. I've always been very athletic, doing everything....I'm going to keep on going and going and I'm going to run into heaven.

***Cheerleading: "I Can Do It."***

[My bowling led to my involvement with cheerleading.] [Corky], I bowl with her. She said, "You'd make a good cheerleader." I said, "No." She said, "Why don't you come over and see?". So I did. I showed up. I looked and thought I'd enjoy it and I did. I was a little nervous at first because of the steps. I said, I'll never get these steps. And they [the cheerleaders] said, "You will but you can't do it overnight." And every time I'd do it, I'd say, "I can't do it." [They'd say], "Yes, you can. Stop saying it. You will do it." And I did. (Laugh). I just felt good. I just thought I would be a clumsy ox. [But] I just keep saying, "I can do it."

....When we did the opening of the women's basketball game.....I was excited. I was in the audience [before we performed]. I felt nervous at first but I went out and I really did it. It was Carolina Girls. And everybody cheered when we got done. Because they see seniors. Teenagers they love. But seniors, it's something [that] they think if they can do it, I can do it....When they gave us a standing ovation, it was so exciting. I enjoy it and I enjoy being out amongst the crowd where they can see that I can do it. They don't just look at the height; they look at what I'm doing, performing. It's fun. When we performed for the Azalea Queen [during the Azalea Festival], they all loved us. I mean, they just loved us. I think we did really good. And especially in the homes for the elderly when we perform, they just think it's great. It makes me feel important. For many years, I was in the background.

I get a little nervous when I first start off but I don't look at the audience. I'm looking straight ahead.... It's just like [Martha] says, "You know it....Stop looking like you're counting." And I said, "Well, we are." (Laugh). We're learning but once you know it, you don't have to count. You just go with it. The ones we're learning now, the music is there. You just listen to the music. I don't count anymore....I was goofing up when I was practicing. Everybody else was doing it. They said, "We've been doing this for eight months, a year, two years. So don't worry about it; you'll get it." It's like with bowling. I would always say, "Well, I can't get the 10 pin." It's always been a bad pin for me to get. Someone said, "Don't go up with the attitude you can't do it." In your head, "I can do it" and you've got to know you can do it. I've been missing it with some but I'm getting it more often, so that's the way with cheerleading. I don't want to say, "I can't do it." I can do it! You have to have confidence.

***"It Helps Me with a Lot of Things."***

[When I first heard about the senior cheerleaders], I said, "I can't imagine seniors doing the cheers." But when I watched them, I said, "I can't believe this. They're great. And they do the things." When I tell my family that I am a cheerleader, [they say], "What? I got to see this." I say, "Well, yes." It gives me energy. It helps me with a lot of things....I love it! It keeps me happy. It keeps me moving. I don't want to just sit and rock in a chair.... I look forward to Tuesdays and Thursdays. I'm disappointed when I come over here [and we don't have practice]. I get up in the mornings and say, "Well, this is Tuesday."

....Being a cheerleader has helped me overcome a lot of [my negative feelings about my height]. It [has] made me a little bit more confident with myself. Because I felt like, by the height that I am, I said, “If I do this, I’ll be completely out of proportion.” But I don’t think of it when I’m with the girls. I don’t think of it that way. Sure I do stand out, but I don’t think about that. I just do it. What I have to do. And they don’t mention anything about my size and that makes me feel better about myself. I seemed shy when I first came here. I was because I didn’t know how the people were going to react. But nobody said anything. They all acted like I had been here for years. I’m in tune with everybody. I feel good. I feel good about myself. Once and awhile I’ll foul up, like in a performance. I just try to get back into it like it doesn’t happen. [Like the speaker I heard, a former Miss North Carolina who is also 6’4”], the whole thing of hers is to accept what you can’t change and laugh at yourself. I accept that I can’t change. I still haven’t been able to laugh at myself. (Laugh). I just get out and do my best. If you do something wrong, keep going like you didn’t do anything wrong. Nobody’s perfect.

### ***“Going for the Gold”***

....[After winning the gold medal at competition], I’ve been telling everybody. I.... had my gold medal around my neck down at the bowling alley. I’ve been showing off the pictures. I called my radio station....I was very excited about the whole thing....When they started cheering before the music came on, they were all cheering....and all of a sudden the adrenalin went up. And when

Esther got up, [when] she stood up on that pyramid, that was great. She went straight up. I thought the pyramid was fantastic....I was right there with the shortest girl. And helped [her] up on that pyramid. And we all smiled and we all looked like we were having a good time. I was having a ball. And when we got up on stage and they said, “3<sup>rd</sup> place winner, 2<sup>nd</sup> place winner”, and I held my breath when they said, “1<sup>st</sup> place.” Ooh! I got tears in my eyes. It most definitely was worth it. We put a lot of hard work [into it]. Martha put a lot of hard work in with us because as I told her it would take us a little bit longer because we’re not 18 [and] it took us a little bit longer to learn the routine but we learned it. We did great. And next year we’re going for the gold again.

***“We All Have Our Flaws.”***

....We all had fun. That’s the thing is to have fun. It was nice....We’re all like a big family and we all seem to understand each other. And we, if we make mistakes while we’re learning, one will tell the other one [to] try this and we just work together. I was a little timid at first but nobody ever mentioned about my height. They just accepted me and that’s what I want. To be accepted. Not for whether I’m fat, tall, or skinny. And I accept those girls the same as [they accept me]. We’re not all Miss America. We all have our flaws. And I don’t point out anybody’s flaws because I have enough of my own. (Laugh).

***“Fills MyLife ”***

....[Cheerleading] is number one [with me]. I love bowling and it comes in pretty close but I’ve done bowling so long and this is new to me. I want to learn

those steps. If I had a choice to go bowling or to cheerleading, I'd go cheerleading. If I have to cheer and I have bowling, I'll get someone to bowl for me.... It really has filled my life with excitement and friends who don't turn [on you] and scratch your eyeballs out. I'm excited about all these [performances] coming up. It's one right after the other [now] with the convention; we're going to do the Christmas thing. We're going to do it for a 90 year old birthday party. It's just going on. It's endless and the more excited I get, the more things we're going to do. It fills my life, too, because I live alone. My son lives with me....[but] he's got his own life so he comes and goes. So, it's exciting to me because it fills my life that I have something to do. I'd like to get involved in more things down here, too. If it doesn't take away from my cheerleading. And my whole family, they're excited, "My mother's a cheerleader!"

### Rose's Life Themes

Rose is the newest member of the squad. She has been cheering for about a year. The youngest of 5 children, Rose grew up in Indiana, a state renowned for its basketball heritage. Rose took offense when people automatically assumed that, because of her height, she played basketball. All her life, she has been sensitive about her height and felt that people were staring at her and making fun of her because she was so tall. She reported being "the tallest girl in [her] school" and "automatically stood out." Rose wanted to be accepted and recognized for something other than her height.

Acceptance was a strong theme running throughout Rose's narrative. Throughout her life, few people seemed to give Rose the unconditional acceptance that she so longed

for. Rose's memories from early childhood on into adulthood were filled with incidents of ridicule and rejection. She was left on her own to raise 3 sons after her husband's drinking and unfaithfulness led to the break up of their marriage. She felt that she did not readily get the help she needed when she turned to community agencies for assistance. She persevered in her search for help and in her job-hunting efforts because she "had to look after her kids."

Rose's sensitivity about her height motivated her to leave her home state and move to New York. She was seeking a place where she would not stand out. Even hundreds of miles away, Rose's height was still an issue for her. An insensitive remark about her lack of need for high heels led to Rose not wearing heels to this day.

Recognition was a prominent theme throughout Rose's narrative. She sought recognition in ways other than her height through activities such as music and writing. Rose loved to sing and would have liked to have sung professionally but never fully followed her dream. She was also very athletic and enjoyed baseball, volleyball, running, bowling, and eventually, cheerleading. Cheerleading was the one activity that provided Rose with the acceptance and healthy recognition that she was seeking. Rose reported that she "enjoys being out amongst the crowd where they can see that I can do it." She values the expressions of appreciation from the audience: "Everybody cheered when we got done....They all just thought we were wonderful...They gave us a standing ovation; it was so exciting."

Audience reaction seemed to be important to Rose in terms of inspiring confidence in her own abilities. Rose sought approval and encouragement not only from

her audience but from her sister cheerleaders, as well. When Rose first started coming to cheerleading practice, she reports that she “was a little timid at first but nobody ever mentioned my height.” “They just accepted me and that’s what I want-- to be accepted, not for whether I’m short or tall, fat or skinny.” Rose commented that the cheerleaders are “like a big family” and “we all seem to understand each other.” She has accepted the others in the same way as they accepted her: “I don’t point out anybody’s flaws because I got enough of my own.”

Rose attributed her increased self confidence to her participation in cheerleading: “It has helped me overcome a lot of it and...made me a little bit more confident with myself...” Cheerleading has helped her to become less self conscious about her height. She reported, “I don’t think about [my height] when I am with the girls.” While on a recent trip, Rose was inspired by a performance she heard. In addressing her audience, the former Miss North Carolina emphasized the importance of being able “to accept what you can’t change and to laugh at yourself.” Rose shared during the interview process that she “can accept things I can’t change [but] I still haven’t been able to laugh at myself.” I suspect that Rose has grown further in this area than she realizes, as she punctuated the statement about laughing at herself with a laugh.

Rose’s participation in cheerleading has given her the encouragement to try new things: “I want to try tap dance [and] I’m very interested in Rocking Chair Players; I’m contented but I want to try more.” Rose has already tried her hand at acting as she has been an extra in some of the movies filmed in the Wilmington area. She also has received some notoriety from a local radio station. Her announcement of the station’s

identification (“This is WWQQ!”) has been aired from time to time. She also is a regular caller at the station and has established a personal relationship with all the announcers there. Rose has recently been involved in calling Bingo games at the senior center in addition to playing Bingo herself.

Rose reflected on her inner purpose for cheerleading, “[I] just keep going and doing what [Martha] said and smile and have fun.” She had mentioned earlier that cheerleading filled her life with excitement and friends. Cheerleading seems to have created a sense of fulfillment, recognition, acceptance, and confidence for Rose. Her love of music and performing have been well channeled through cheerleading. Having personally experienced the encouragement of her team mates, Rose now enthusiastically communicates encouragement to the audiences for which she performs. Her “can-do” attitude has inspired many an audience as well as her team mates.

### Enthusiastic Esther

Esther! 69!

#### ***“An Interesting Childhood ”***

I was born and raised in Miami, Florida. I was adopted. I had two wonderful parents. Mine was a very interesting childhood, I think. I had all the childhood diseases you could possibly have. I did get severely burned when I was three years old in a kitchen fire, but I overcame that. Mom and Dad were there for me. [My] Dad was very active in politics and all the civic organizations. He was a barber. His nickname was Smitty, the barber....He became secretary of the barbers’ union and I helped work on the books with him and got interested in

office at that time. My Dad was a Mason and....Mom was very active in Eastern Star. I was a Rainbow Girl and traveled quite a bit with the Rainbow Girls.

....I didn't learn I was adopted until I was 16. I guess because they were older. Dad was 44 and Mother was 36 when I was adopted...They were raised in the Carolinas, North and South Carolina. I think at that point in time it was something that you just did and they didn't particularly want [the] family to know the circumstances....I had good friends that I grew up with that had twin boys that were adopted and we always played together. So that was no big deal and, as I went through school and high school, [I] met many that had been adopted but had been told at an earlier age, so anyway, whatever their reason was fine. It didn't change anything. In fact, I appreciated them probably even more because I didn't end up in an orphanage and no telling what would have happened. I never really wanted to [know about my birth parents]. Once I found out [that I was adopted], I was too busy. I was busy with all my activities at school and at church and I just never even thought of it. Then when I got married....my first husband mentioned it a couple of times [but] I just didn't [pursue it]. [Mom and Dad] were still alive. It didn't really seem important.

So, I grew up with older parents and sometimes it was hard...I didn't get to go places that other kids did because they had a brother or sister older than them that would watch out for them. I missed some things but I didn't miss a lot. I was an only child....and spoiled rotten, especially [by] my Dad. Mom said, "You got him wrapped around your little finger." Both of [my parents] were from large families

in the Carolinas. Once I got up and we started coming up here in the summers to visit and all my cousins and aunts and uncles, it became a big family.

Going into high school, I became interested in music....I joined the chorus they had in school, of course. So that was a big beginning as far as being in something that had music within itself. I did join cheerleading in 9<sup>th</sup> grade....[I went to] a huge[high] school [in a suburb of Miami]. [It had] some 2500 students. I was very active in school. I was in everything you could think of....In 10<sup>th</sup> grade, I got into the band and I played clarinet for three years. I had enough credits so the last year I could go back into chorus.

### ***Young Adulthood***

I did stay in business as I graduated and came out of high school and went to work with Florida Power and Light which was another great experience. I worked there until I got married. I graduated in 1952 [and] got married in 1952....I met [my first husband, Andy], through his sister. When I was going to [high] school, we were in 11<sup>th</sup> grade when I first met him. And then he went into service and when he came home on leave, I saw him a couple of times and [he] went back. So when he came [home] after 18 months in Korea....., we just kind of started dating and one thing led to another and we got married in June,[1952]. I was 19; he was 22. I was also working at Florida Power and Light [and]....stayed on because my husband was in the Marines Corp and stationed at Camp Lejeune. I kept working until I was finally able to join him and it was a great experience. I worked with the stock exchange for Florida Power and Light. [Then] we moved up here to

Wilmington. [My husband] was still in the military. I came up here to Wilmington, North Carolina and that was in '52 and stayed until he decided he had had enough of the military....It was the Korean War and so we came out of service. I think it was December of '52.

We went back to Miami where we lived. The children were born [there]. Denise was born in '53 and [was] just a delightful little girl. And then [Andy, Jr.] was born in '55. There's two years' difference [between them]. And [Matthew] was born in '58....All of them were very good babies.

### ***Tough Time***

My husband, [their father] passed away in '69 of a massive cerebral. He was only 40 years old. So from that time on it became my, I won't say job, but it became for me to work and provide for the children which were 11, 12, and 16 or 15 when [their] dad died. So we got through it. It was a tough time. Because some of the people thought that I could do better or they could do better. So I told them if they could they were welcome to come along and I'd stop working....Mother and Dad were very supportive. When my husband died....my dad became very close [to me]....He got sick where Mother couldn't take care of him and he wound up in the VA hospital in Nashville. He was there about seven years off and on because he would fall and, as he did, it was very hard for [Mother] to get him up.

***“Fitting It All Together ”***

...The last couple of years that he was alive he told my oldest son and my youngest son that I was his daughter....Fitting it all together and then what little conversation I had with him only one time...He told me he just kept it a secret because he wasn't proud of what he did to have an extramarital affair....So I took it as it had been given to me that, yes, that probably did happen.

It was always a bit of something there....I was more like my Dad. [In] everything. Politics, anything outdoors, public relations, anything with people. That was me. That was him. So, as I got older, I realized that that's where I got it--from Dad's side. Mother was more quiet, reserved. She loved to be at home. She didn't really like to go places. Two or three days and she was ready to come back home. I always felt very needed and very loved by both of them.

My dad died in '87; he was 91. Actually, I went to my mother and asked if it were true [about being my father's biological daughter]. I said, "It won't matter one bit to me." She said it was [true]. I said, "That's fine. I still love you and you're my mom and you know it doesn't change anything." There was still that little space [between us]....But before she died we became very good friends. Mother was 96 and she died in '93. As long as she was active, and she was active, she'd run races with me. I think her little heart just gave out.

***“Come Out Here and Join Me.”***

I met [my second husband] in 1975. He was a sailor. He had a boat. He came into the Ft. Lauderdale area and I met him there through some of [my] other

friends that I knew that had boats and we just got acquainted. He owned his own boat at that time. Denise was already married. Andy, Jr. and Matthew were working with Denise's husband in the electrical [field]. I like the water because [my first husband's family were] outdoors people. They fished, hunted, and camped, and so [it was] a beautiful life.

Dan finally sold [his boat]. He went back to California [to his profession which was dental x-ray.] [He owned a lab.] I had too good a job to give up. About six or seven months later, he called and said he was just going to stay out there, back in his profession. [Earlier we had gone] into business together....We went into business to see if we could get along. And it worked out very well. [We operated a western store, the Bar-None.] We had two horses. We had feed. We had anything you need--Western clothes, boots--anything you need as far as horses go. I ran the business for about five months after he left [but] we had owned it longer. When he got out [to California], he said, "I think you should just go ahead and sell the business and just come out here and join me." Which at that time nobody was at home. Matthew....was up at Asheville with my Mom and Dad running a hotel that they had. So there was no reason for me not to [go].

So I sold the store and came up to Asheville and visited with Mom and Dad for several weeks. Then I said, "I'm going out to California to see what he has in store." Which I did. When I got out there, he said, "I'm doing so well in my practice, I think we ought to get married." We toured [Lake] Tahoe and had a lot of fun and then we went to Carson City....We decided while we were there we'd

just get married. We married in a little chapel and then we toured all that country [and then] flew back to San Diego. Dan went back to work. He had a full staff so I didn't need to work....We had an offer to go to Walnut Creek....and open a lab there and so we took that opportunity and moved all our things up there....Once we got to Walnut Creek we opened up the lab....Night and day we worked. Opening the business and getting the doctors. I was the PR person. We had some 90 doctors before we left in '83. We bought a campground in Lake Lure and that's when we left California.

***“Come See What You Can Do.”***

....We sold the campground in '87 [and lived in Wilmington for about three months before] Dan got a call from his brother in Vista, California that he needed help with his lab....[Dan went on ahead and I came later.] In June of '89, we got a call from Matthew [who had my mother at the time.] He said, “Mom, she's just getting so I can't go off and leave her and I've got to work, so can you come and see what you....can do.” So I [told Dan to sell the business]. We were going to retire anyway the next year....We'll just do it earlier. So he sold the business and came on out and we just moved....into Carolina Beach.

....We finally had [Mother] come stay with us in our little house we rented....[She] stayed with us for about four months. She got to the point that she would wander off so we looked for a home. She stayed[in a nursing home] for two to three months but she wasn't getting enough exercise; all she wanted to do was sit. We moved her to another... home... which was great for her. She got all

the freedom she needed. She got activity, exercise, and she was into everything. She fell and broke her hip and that put her down for a while and after that it seemed like it was one thing after another. They amputated her leg and it was harder for her to get around. She was in a wheelchair and it just went from one thing to the next and then the other leg, she had that one amputated.... Without the exercise, she wasn't moving so she developed pneumonia and eventually she died.... It was a care giving situation for a long time. I went three to four times a week.... She knew us up until the last couple of years and then she got really bad.

***Activity and Cheerleading: "You Need to Come Join Us."***

[After mother's death] I got very active in the senior center, ABWA, [American Business Women's Association], AARP, American Legion Auxiliary, Red Cross. I became very active in all the organizations on the island. I was President of the AARP for four years. I ran for Town Council in '97. I was in the Sweetheart Pageant. Through a lot of these organizations.... I met Corky who is the one who kept after me for I don't know how many months to come to cheerleading. [I kept seeing her] at different places and then I would come down here to different shows and different things and that's where I got acquainted with her. And then the Bingo that we have every Thursday night at the senior center, she and her husband always came to that. I was always goofing around and heading up this and heading up that so she said, "You need to come join us." I said, "Okay, I can do that." She had asked a couple of the other ladies about cheering and I think they came maybe once or twice. It just wasn't what they

wanted. And then we got to cutting up and cheering and doing crazy things. I told Corky, "I think I'd like to come and just see what you're doing." So I came about three different times and I thought, "This might be fun." So then I got into it.

***"It's Different: It's Fun."***

....[Cheerleading] was something different. Here [was] something I really had to concentrate on to do the cheers. I couldn't think about all the other stuff that was happening and all the other things. It kind of made you just think of cheerleading. Focus. Just the one to two hours here, just focus. Some of the [things that I was doing] were not really stressful, but took a lot of time planning where I didn't have to plan [the cheers]. Martha did that. (Laugh). The other cheerleaders would plan the places to go and perform so I didn't have to. So the main reason [I do it is] it's fun....I performed last year in Raleigh and that's when we took 2<sup>nd</sup> place. It was an experience...Towards the last we had a lot of practices that last month. It was practice, practice, practice. And then we were performing at different places to know that routine to make sure we really got it. [We performed at] local places.

And then we got back [from competition and performed at] the Festival of Trees [for Hospice]. Everything just fell into place, the different nursing homes, the schools. And we've really come a long way. We've tried to do some things to raise funds. We did a raffle so maybe we can get some things like all the same color bags and maybe all new shoes and help a couple of us foot the expense of going to Raleigh so we can take advantage of it and see everything.

....My first year going to the Senior Games....was a real treat. It was something like the Olympics-- a parade of all the contestants; winning the gold, silver, or whatever; lighting the torch. It was very impressive. To be out there on that field with all those people sitting out there. It was quite a deal. And then seeing that whole operation. It is a splendid thing because of all they do. It never entered my mind that [that] would be something to be proud of to be a part of Senior Games.

And then coming back home once they heard. Wonderful. The places that we went to, to show them what we did. [I] heard from everybody, "You did it. You really did it." The primary function of [cheerleading] is to show other seniors, other people that seniors can do. They can perform. They're active and there's no reason why you shouldn't be active if your health is [good]. Even if you play basketball or football, no matter what you do, just do it because it's going to help you better yourself. We've been to nursing homes and know they can't hear well, but you do get a smile on their faces and [they] start clapping their hands. But it is entertainment for them and better than sitting in their room doing nothing.

***"Good for the Soul"***

....[Cheerleading is an activity that] gives me time for myself; it doesn't require a lot of planning. Learning the routine was a challenge....from the time you begin to work on the routine but it comes together. We have to learn [the routines] but in learning, then we go share. For me, the performances for the people, making them happy, giving them something to be happy about, especially

the nursing homes. Mother was in a nursing home for six years....Being able to go in and entertain is even more rewarding than just going to visit. You sit down and talk. You see the sparkle in their eyes, just noticing they're happy. Then, of course, the younger children. When we go, seeing....how motivated they are to just clap and just yell. So I think along those lines. I'm giving something back to people that wouldn't have it otherwise if we weren't doing it. [Being] physically able to and wanting to be into something that not only gives you pleasure but gives pleasure to other people as we perform.

And then going to the different places we go. It's very rewarding because of all the [events]--Festival of Trees, Azalea Festival, meeting the queen, getting to be a part of a celebration that's nothing but good. I think that's the thing I really like... I appreciate that there are things that you can do and yet you are appreciated and that's good for the soul. That's good for anybody. And yet, I'm doing it because it's me.

[I joined cheerleading at first just for fun.] But I think as you get involved in it, and then if you get into it and get into the other side of it, not just performing to get recognized for yourself....but then you get into the part that you've volunteered. You are a volunteer from day one. Because this is what it is. It's not paid, that's for sure. It's that you're performing and you're doing things for the enjoyment of other people and hopefully that they will be entertained by what we do. In the long run, of course, that gives us a good feeling about ourselves [and] makes us want to continue.

***Philosophy of Aging: “Everybody Can Do Something.”***

And then when we do [it] for the younger people, we always stress to them that this is what you will be able to do if you keep active and take care of your body. Do the things as you grow up and encourage parents to get up. Don't let them sit and say, “Oh, there's nothing for me.” There is. There's a lot here as far as Wilmington goes. There's no reason for them to sit home eight hours a day, five days a week. Everybody can do [something]. If you can't find something here, something is wrong. [Activity] keeps you mentally and physically [healthy]. Mentally busy. I have to do this, my background and everything. [If I didn't stay active], I'd probably become irritable. I've seen too many of the seniors living down on the island, at church, and different places. The older people [that] are not doing, they're not happy. There will come a time when you have to give up some things but until that time comes, I'll do [it] as long as I can. It is very important at this point of life to stay active as long as you can.... I think everyone has to get their own niche and once they find it and once you've made up your mind you're going to stay active, then do it no matter what it is.

Esther's Life Themes

Esther was adopted by loving parents who made her feel wanted and accepted. She was an only child. Esther and her parents were active in civic organizations. Her father served as an officer in the local barber union. Esther reported that her father's participation in the union “got [her] interested in office at that time.” Her early exposure

to civic and political affairs influenced Esther's involvement in politics and community service as an adult. She ran for Town Council in 1997 and has been a member of various civic and professional organizations including AARP, American Legion Auxiliary, Red Cross, and ABWA. She was also a contestant in a senior sweetheart banquet.

Esther relayed that she was "very active in school" and "in everything you could think of." She was a cheerleader in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. It sounds like, even as a child, Esther had her plate full with one activity after another. The activities she chose were those that tend to be team oriented--band, chorus, cheerleading, and civic affairs.

The themes associated with Esther's early and later activities include team involvement, community/public relations, and business affairs. The importance of partnership and team effort in work and play were evidenced in business relationships with her second husband and the teaming of Esther and her son in caring for her elderly mother. Esther was exposed to the business world by her parents: They owned a hotel in the mountains of North Carolina. Together, Esther and her husband owned a western shop, a campground, and a dental lab. Esther's organizational and public relations skills served her well in campaigning for a seat on the Town Council and in serving her community and church through various leadership positions.

Esther's strengths in interpersonal relations and organizational abilities have benefited her cheerleading squad and the senior community as a whole. She has coordinated fund raising activities for the cheerleaders and has been instrumental in scheduling performances throughout the local area. Esther has assisted the coordinator in promoting positive relationships between the general public and the senior adult

community. She has been active in church work and has served as her church's senior program coordinator, planning activities and educational programs for the senior adults in her church community. Esther has been involved in spearheading many activities and events at the senior center down at the beach where she and her husband live. Esther has "always liked working with people...and helping people." Esther viewed cheerleading as a way of "doing a service to older people and showing younger people that there is a life after they get 55 and 60." She felt that older adults who "have so much to give and [are] not giving and just sitting at home... are wasting away." Esther's business background made her keenly alert to the way both economic and human resources were managed.

Throughout her life, Esther demonstrated a high level of community, business, and civic involvement. Esther found cheerleading to be something of a respite from the continuous planning and organizational efforts required in her other activities. She stated that cheerleading "was something different" and when participating in this activity she "couldn't think about all the other stuff that was happening." It was fun and Esther "didn't have to plan" anything because [Martha] took care of that. Esther also saw cheerleading as a way to give back to the community and to be ambassadors for the City of Wilmington.

Family and faith themes were evident in Esther's transcripts. Esther shared that to her family is "foremost in [her] life." "What gets me really excited is when I know that they're coming in to town or I know that we're going to visit or I know that we're all going to gather." Esther is "totally committed" to her faith. "You get away from it, then you come back because without it nothing is complete. My Father is very strong and I

believe that everything that we do, there is a reason why we do it and why it turns out like it does.” Esther felt that God may be saying to her that cheerleading “might...be good for you and you have something to give and something to share so as long as you can, do it, and feel good about it.”

### Adventurous Catherine

Catherine! 71!

#### ***“My Childhood: Full of Adventure”***

[I was] a depression kid. But we never knew it, never felt it. We had some good times [growing up in New York]. I had a fantastic childhood....We were a close knit family. My brother and sisters still talk about that....how lucky we are. There has never been a major disagreement. I am the second oldest. I have an older sister and a younger brother and sister.

....[My childhood was full of adventure.] My grandfather introduced us to gambling. He belonged to the Lion’s Club and he would take us down there when he was going to meetings and he was into politics....A favorite thing to do when he was running for office was to get together at Dad’s shop. Mom made sandwiches for [his supporters]. I carried [the sandwiches] to the shop and ate more [along the way] than I carried. (Laugh)....[Another time my grandfather took us ice skating.] He actually drove the car out on the ice. [There we were] six little kids in the backseat. The car went into open water. I tried to stuff my brother out the window to save him. My aunt [who was riding up front] tried to help us all out.

....My grandfather took us to the most interesting places. He took us to the Department of Corrections. He took us all through that. It was huge. He used to take us to the filtration plant. We really liked that, for some reason. He took us to a lot of places. And so did my grandmother. We'd go to the city. They let us loose [to go exploring]. I was about 10 years old. I cannot imagine letting my grandchildren go and do some of the things that we did. [I had my share of accidents, too] Once, I closed the car door on my hand. Then I dropped a big stone on my foot when I was trying to rescue some kittens. I remember Dad taking care of me until Mom came back.

I had wonderful examples to follow in terms of my mother and dad and how they approached us and I tried to bring that into my own marriage and raising my kids the same. We were a close family....[I remember] holidays gathering around the piano and singing. Dad always sang. Clambakes. [In the summer, exploring Baker's Island] off the coast of Massachusetts. You could roam the island and have it all to yourself. All the kids. I think that's where my passion for traveling came.

***“Passion for Traveling: Great Experiences”***

....I think it started with my folks because they loved to travel and they took us. I can remember hearing the story about Dad coming home from work one day and walking into the house and saying to Mom, “How would you like to go for a little drive?” And she said, “Sure, to where?” And he said, “Florida!” And so the next day they took off for Florida. They did their share of traveling although they

never went overseas or anything like that. My mom finally did when she went with my mother's brother.

I had a steady boyfriend when I was in college and he was from my hometown. He was really my first love. You know how they say you never forget and I never have forgotten. He was a dear boy. But at the same time, when I got into college....I must have known that was never really going to satisfy me. When I met my husband [Joe in college], I didn't know what the future for me would hold. It could have turned out to be the same sort of thing in a different town but then he decided to join the Coast Guard. It was definitely a plus for me because....almost immediately I started to travel and I never minded it. The first couple of moves that we made, the first two, when he went into flight training and our first duty station...was in Alaska. It was a little intimidating. I wasn't thrilled to death to find out I was going to be living in Alaska.....It was so far away....from family and everything. And I had never been exposed to that and it turned out to be the greatest experience, one of the greatest experiences. In fact, we extended. My daughter was born in Alaska. And when the time came to move from there, it wasn't like, "Oh, this is a big chore. It's terrible."

.... I always looked forward to a new place and particularly in the Coast Guard which is a small unit compared to other services, you knew you were going to make new friends easily when you're in that community. And because Joe and I both looked forward to it and didn't mind it, I think we instilled that in our kids so it was never traumatic for them even though they were changing schools and

making new friends....And I think that's where they get their love for it, because [my daughter] loves to travel. Every time we had to move, it was always positive. We never got out of the South for several years. We went from Missouri to Alabama to Washington, D. C. We divorced in Washington. [We were married] 22 years.

***“Scared to Death”***

....They say that adversity either breaks you or makes you stronger. I was scared to death when I got my divorce. Scared to death. Never been on my own. You know, from the cradle to that time in my life. When you're married to an alcoholic for years and years and years....they can drain you because everything they do, they blame it on you. Everything they do. So very slowly confidence just seeps away. And that's why I was so frightened when our marriage ended. I didn't know if I'd be able to make it or not. Plus I still had two kids at home to raise [and wondering if] I could do it.

....In college, I was into everything. It was the best four years of my life....I was into all kinds of activities. I wasn't a cheerleader but I was into student government. I was into debating, just a lot of things that kept me busy. [The self confidence] kind of goes away. It was a very small world, very small world indeed.... My kids couldn't bring friends home. They turn to you; they don't want to be in social situations. Your world gets smaller and smaller and smaller and in the meantime you have less and less and less confidence [about whether] you're doing the right thing, saying the right thing, being the right kind of person....When

I first started working...any kind of criticism...just killed me. I just could not take any kind of criticism. That's all part of the holding in the confidence and it carries over to every part, every aspect of your life. And it took me a long time to remember (a) everybody's not going to like you [and] (b) criticizing someone in the right way can be very positive, not negative.

***"It Gets That Bad."***

....I had made the decision [to divorce] when he got transferred from the DC area and he was there for years and he had a drinking problem, obviously, and it got steadily worse. And Lacey was going into her senior year of high school and I made the decision to remain and let her finish. He was transferred to Elizabeth City, North Carolina. He was having an affair. Lacey was 18 and Jake was 12 when [their dad] and I got divorced. Tough, tough time.... In a lot of ways, [I was relieved] because it used to get to the point where I would have a knot in my stomach every time I had to walk through that front door. It really gets that bad. From the viewpoint of other things, how am I going to financially support myself and finish raising my kids, it was not a sense of relief at all....Away from family, truly, we were on our own.

....My daughter's reaction was to remove herself from her house. She moved out. She was so young. She just wasn't ready. My son's reaction [was anger]. Everything he did, I believe, came out of anger, with [having] problems in school. He just barely made it through high school. Somewhere within him he had a core of confidence or something. He was able to make the decision to go into service

on his own rather than drift. He got some of the discipline that I was unable to provide, or if I provided it, I was just so frustrated I didn't do it properly. We butted heads; we truly did. I can remember when we had a problem which was often (laugh), I would go to him and say, "Look, I know this is a struggle now but we are going to get through this and we're going to come out okay on the other side and we're going to love each other." And I loved him dearly. I've gotten some of the neatest...Christmas cards and Mother's Day cards from him expressing how much now he appreciated what I did then. They mean the world to me....To know that he could have turned against me.

***"I Enjoy Being on My Own."***

I found out that I'm able to take care of myself and that didn't happen overnight. It was a slow evolving process. My brother, particularly, [asks], "Don't you hate being by yourself? Isn't that lonely?" And I don't. Truly, I don't. I don't know whether it's egotistical or not, [but] I enjoy my own company. I really and truly don't mind being by myself. I'm out and about and have friends and everything enough so that I'm not lonely. I enjoy being on my own....I look forward to every month....sitting down and paying my bills because I got such a sense of satisfaction after I was on my own and I was able to do that. I literally pat myself on the back. I truly do....Being put in a position where I had to go out and make a living for myself and being fortunate enough to find a company that.... had enough confidence in me to put me into management positions. Then you really

are put on the line. You've been given a responsibility and you have to come across. What that did for me.

The good Lord was looking out for me, too. Sometimes I can't believe how fortunate I have been in my life. I'm really very satisfied with my life right now. I have such a great relationship [with my kids]....They really and truly do sustain me. We spend as much time as we can together. I just enjoy every minute of it. I'd rather travel with my daughter than any other person in the world, I really would. We enjoy the same things and we really travel well together. And the same with my son. Although we have never done any traveling together.... He's so funny. I just get the biggest kick out of him. He has the most wonderful sense of humor....It's a delight to be around him....We just all enjoy each other.

### ***“Quite by Accident”***

....When I retired here to Wilmington, I had no idea that life was going to be the way it is today. I picked Wilmington because I thought, “Well, it has everything I want.” It had the senior center. I visited here and realized that it was a very active senior center. But the major draw was the college....I had every intention of [taking classes]....Except that I found the [dishing] business that I [do] and that was....quite by accident. But it was shortly after I got here [I] started doing that and that gave me the funds I needed to do the traveling that I do.

I had just settled in Wilmington. I knew I wanted to remain active. I didn't know anybody. I did not know a soul in Wilmington. I came down to the senior center and I was standing at the front desk just asking some general questions.

And one of the cheerleaders who was already in the group came in. She had her pom-poms with her and that's how I recognized she was there for practice. So I just made the comment, "Oh, I used to be a cheerleader in high school." (Laugh). That's all it took. The next thing I know she was grabbing me by the arm and saying, "Come on down and watch us practice." I did and that's how it started....The very next week I was at practice and it was fun. [That was some five years ago.]

***"Stay Active and Get Involved."***

My main objective [for joining] was to get involved and stay active. I had no notion that there was a group called senior cheerleaders. I thought, "This is something I know I would enjoy doing, having done it in the past." I like to make a fool of myself on occasion. (Laugh)...Cheerleading is something I just enjoy immensely and it's fun. And I make a certain level of commitment [to it].... but it's not the first thing in my life....I have to have some of those other things in my life. That's what makes my world go around....I try to be around when I know something important is coming up. I honestly feel guilty sometimes when I can't make every practice. I really do and that bothers me a lot. Yet at the same time I don't want to give it up.....It [used to] fit nicely into things. It doesn't so much anymore because I have gotten very busy with other things. [Like my family, traveling, and my dishing business.] I do feel guilty when I can't give the cheerleaders the attention and the involvement that I think would be ideal....but I still enjoy doing it.

It certainly opened the doors....It's a way to make some friends down here because I moved into the community not knowing anyone and certainly a difficult step for anybody to take. I honestly did see myself doing more volunteer work....than I have ended up being able to do....I know those options are there....if I decided I want to do them if I get tired of traveling. Ho. Ho. Ho. (Laugh).... I think seeing my mom go down a different path and seeing my older sister do the same thing now bothers me a little bit.... I'm afraid she'll do the same thing Mom did and become less and less involved....

***“A Whole Bunch of Things”***

[Cheerleading is a way to stay involved and active.] It is more than one thing....It's a wonderful way to socialize. And that's important, I think. The physical activity, I think, is another thing in terms of keeping your muscles a little bit limber and....every little bit helps for that kind of exercise....Emotionally....It's a purpose in your life. You have something to look forward to and you have something you enjoy doing....It's a whole bunch of things, not just one little thing....It's all part of the staying active which means you're not only staying active physically but you stay active mentally....Even with my traveling, it isn't just that I enjoy doing it. There's another purpose and the purpose is to continue to learn and to grow. I want to do that because I don't think you ever come to the end of your growth, ever....There's more than meets the eye to [any activity]. That would certainly hold true for cheerleading....There's the physical aspect. There's the mental aspect....[There's the social aspect].

***“What I Am, I Am.”***

[I plan to be stay in cheerleading] certainly for the foreseeable future....As long as I can do it and not feel so obligated that I have to give up other things. As long as they [the other cheerleaders] understand those things are important to me and accept me like that....Look, I’ve gotten to the point in my life [that] “What I am, I am”....You accept me the way that I am or you don’t. This is it. I know every once and a while I embarrass my kids because I am what I am. I can laugh at myself....To me, that is all very healthy....

[Winning a gold medal doesn’t really] mean anything to me. What am I going to do with [another] gold medal? I don’t need that to make me feel good about me. I just don’t. I don’t think that keeps me from trying to do my best or practicing hard. I hope it doesn’t because I don’t want to let other people down....My performance is going to be the best job I can do....It’s supposed to be fun and if it isn’t, I ain’t going to do it. (Laugh). The same way with the dishing that I do. As long as it’s fun to do, I’ll do it. When it stops being fun and I think, “Oh, no,” then I won’t do it anymore.

***“Fits into Life”***

....It [cheerleading] fits into the kind of life that I want to be leading right now. [It] makes sense from my past, because I was a cheerleader and knew the enjoyment of it from many, many years ago....I don’t believe in coincidences either. That I happened to be standing out at the front desk the day that Rachel was on her way to practice and grabbed me by the arm just because I made this

comment. I sort of feel like, “Well, this is what’s supposed to be.” [Cheerleading] helps to keep me active. It helps to keep me involved....At this point, [it’s] the only exercise I’m getting because I can’t even walk with these dumb feet of mine....which hopefully we’ll start taking care of that problem [soon]. And I enjoy the company, the fellowship. So there’s a lot of things that make me want to continue to do it.

....[There are other things that I want to do in the future.]....More travel. This trip to Kenya that has been a burning desire to make that kind of trip. And there are others. Places that I’ve been and I’d like to return because I enjoyed them so much....I would like to live in Europe for a few months....I’d like to try parasailing. I definitely want to go for a balloon ride. I’m still thinking about taking a couple of courses down at the college....As long as I can, as much as I can, I intend to enjoy the rest of my life.

### Catherine’s Life Themes

Travel and family were obvious themes throughout Catherine’s narrative. Catherine had a “fantastic childhood.” Her grandfather provided adventure after adventure for Catherine and her siblings. Childhood was a time for exploration. Looking back, Catherine marveled at how she and her sisters and brother were “let loose” to go exploring in the City. She could not imagine allowing her 10 year old grandson to have the same freedom. Her childhood adventures whetted her appetite for later traveling and exploring. She said that her “passion for traveling” came from her parents’ own love of travel. This passion was further kindled by marrying someone in the Coast Guard and

experiencing moving as a regular part of their lives. She and her husband never dreaded the moves and actually looked forward to going to new places. Catherine still looks forward to traveling to new places and returning to places that she has previously enjoyed visiting. She has traveled extensively across the United States and abroad. She would love to return to Europe and actually live there for several months to “explore” and take in the European culture. Her upcoming travel plans include a trip to Africa.

Catherine is affiliated with Elderhostel, a university program for senior adults combining education and travel. Learning was a subtheme of travel. Catherine spoke of her love of travel, not just for the enjoyment of traveling, but for the learning opportunities it presented in terms of experiencing different cultures and lifestyles and becoming more knowledgeable about the history and geography of certain areas. Learning was a broader theme in Catherine’s narrative as she tended to grow and mature through every life experience whether adverse or positive.

Family was a primary theme in Catherine’s narrative. She shared that hers was a very close knit family. Her parents were “wonderful examples” and she tried to bring their parenting style into her own marriage and in raising her own children. Catherine has an excellent relationship with her two adult children, as well as with her siblings and their families. They enjoy each other’s company and “have a good time together.” That family closeness has been extended to her daughter-in-law and son-in-law: “I love them dearly; they’re like my own kids.” Catherine described her daughter as “my best friend.” She had rather travel with her daughter “than any other person in the world.” Catherine was equally appreciative of her son referring to his “wonderful sense of humor” and that

“it’s a delight to be around him.”

Staying active and being involved were high on Catherine’s list of priorities. Those were her main objectives when she moved to Wilmington after her retirement. She saw cheerleading as a way to fulfill those needs. Catherine witnessed her mother’s declining health and her shrinking involvement with the outside world. Catherine has hope that her “pathway will not be the same as [her] mother’s” because of some of the preventive type things that she is doing now in terms of pursuing a healthier, more involved lifestyle and maintaining a high level of activity.

Cheerleading has provided a means for Catherine to stay active and involved. Having been a high school cheerleader, she knew “the enjoyment of it from many, many years ago.” When discussing her inner purpose for cheerleading, Catherine emphasized that “cheerleading is more than one thing.” There are physical, mental, and social components. “It’s a wonderful way to socialize. The physical activity...keeps your muscles limber. [Learning the routines addresses the mental aspect.] It’s a purpose in your life. You have something to look forward to and you have something you enjoy doing.”

Even with all the benefits of cheerleading, Catherine has made it clear that cheerleading is not number one in her book. Cheerleading no longer fits into her lifestyle as well as it once did. Her life has become a little more complicated and her priorities have been re-ordered. She has made it clear that she does not want to give up the other things in her life that bring her pleasure in order to accommodate the cheerleading schedule. She does not want to give up one activity for another. She feels that she needs

to be balanced in all areas- family, travel, work, play, and physical activity. Catherine is adamant about not being tied down and refuses to give up her “freedom” to travel, explore, and enjoy family. She has enjoyed the benefits of both travel and family as her daughter is her number one traveling companion.

As long as Catherine can maintain her current state of balance without feeling pressured to give something up, she will remain an enthusiastic member of the squad. Catherine brings to her team the unique ability to be able to see the other side in any given situation. She has excellent mediation and conflict resolution skills which tend to make her the peacemaker of the group. She strives to see the good in others and in all life’s situations. The events in Catherine’s life have provided her with good training in these areas.

#### Captain Corky

Corky! 71!

#### ***“Spoiled Rotten”***

I was adopted when I was 10 days old.... My friend told me one time, she says, “Your mother spoiled you all your life and then she died, and your husband took over and he’s spoiling you all the rest of your life.” (Laugh).... I never wanted to [know my biological parents]. I didn’t want to interrupt anybody else’s life. I was completely satisfied with the wonderful parents that I had. I didn’t have any brothers and sisters. [My mother] had one little boy that died before I was born and she was told that she couldn’t have any more children.

....My mama and daddy lived in Jacksonville, Florida [and] that was where I was born. We lived there for five years and then moved to Atlanta, Georgia for three years [where] I went to 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grades. Then we moved to Wilmington when I was 8 [years old].... I went to Isaac Bear School. [I] used to walk there during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades....We started going to [Calvary Baptist Church] after we moved here. Somebody invited my parents to go....We were living across the river. The church was located on 4<sup>th</sup> and Brunswick at that time. It was started over there and then built on 23<sup>rd</sup> Street. I started going [there] when I was 8 years old....I loved my church.

....Then my father became sick. My mother was sick too and I was so frightened....When I was 9 years old, I remembered thinking, “If I have to lose my mother or my father, who would I want to give up? I love them both so much. I don’t want to give either one of them up.” But, anyway, my father died when I was 11 [years old]. [After he died], Mama didn’t want to stay in the house where we had been living across the river....We moved to Nesbitt Courts and I lived there from the time I was 11 until I was 19....

It was hard for her [after my father died]. She didn’t want to go out and get a job so she was a seamstress. She used to make dresses for \$2. It was just a bad living and... one Christmas [when] I was 14 all I got for Christmas was a pair of mittens that she had made. She was an excellent [seamstress] and she crocheted, too. She was very smart with her hands. She tried to teach me but my fingers wouldn’t work. (Laugh).[My mother] and I were very close. And she spoiled me

rotten (laugh) as I'm sure a lot of people can attest to that....I'm sorry. I do the best I can. (Laugh).

***“Wacko over a Ball”***

I loved it over there [at Nesbitt Courts.] We had a planned recreation center. At that time, I started to play ping pong and I loved that. Then I began to play softball. That was my second love. I played softball in school. When I was there at Nesbitt Courts, we would play Lake Forest and Mathic Village... and different places around town. We didn't use any gloves. We just played and caught the ball with our bare hands....[The softball] was not soft. It was hard. We did that until the gloves came into play and then we started using gloves. We went to Greensboro and they had teams up there. I was on the all star team. We started out being fast pitch. Then a few years later, in February, the coach announced we would start playing what they called high pitch...You had to throw the ball way up high and it had to drop down just behind the plate. So I had to learn to do that....But I became very good at that and had a very successful year.

....I [liked] all sports in general. I played volleyball, bowling, and tennis.... I'm wacko over anything with a ball....When I was 10 years old, my mama got a rubber ball and a stick and went out in the backyard. She started throwing the ball to me and I started hitting it and from then on I fell in love with the ball. My mama was right funny. She said if she died that I'd tell them [that] they'd have to hold the funeral until I finished my softball game. (Laugh). [Softball] was in my blood. I played up until I was 65 years old. I would probably still be playing but

the teams kind of fell apart. We didn't have any sponsors and then they didn't have any fields to play [on], so I gave it up at 65. Then I took up tennis and that eased the pain of not being able to play softball.

...When I was going to high school, they would let the girls play in the Old Isaac Bear gym which was dilapidated and everything. And I was always saying, "Well, why can't we play over there in the nice one across the street?" [The answer I got was], "We don't do it that way." I was just hushed down. I had tried back then to get us a better place...to play, but we played in that old gym. The girls had to do what they were told and they were led to believe that they were not as good as the boys. The boys got the nice gym but the girls didn't. [If there had been more opportunities for girls], I think I would have gotten a scholarship to be able to go to college. Otherwise, I couldn't go. My mother couldn't afford to send me.

### ***"Love at First Sight"***

....[I met my husband at a skating rink] My [friend] called me one Sunday afternoon and asked me if I would like to go skating with her. They did not have a skating rink in Wilmington at that time [but] they had one up in Havelock. Her mother and daddy were going to take us up there. So I went and my husband-to-be was working at that skating rink and was also in the Marine Corps at Cherry Point. [Working at the skating rink] was a part time job for him...He came over and asked me if I wanted to skate and it was a couple's skate...I was eating a hot dog and spilled chili all down the front of my dress. (Laugh). He said it was love

at first sight and he wanted to know if he came to Wilmington would I date him. I said, "Well, I guess so."....He started coming to Wilmington and we dated and he got his orders to go overseas to Korea. He wanted to know if I would marry him before he left. So I did. He was over there for one year. Then he came back and we had our first daughter.

.... [We were] both 19 when we got married. I was 21 [when our daughter was born] and 5 years later we had our son. We had moved from Nesbitt Courts to Lake Village when we first got married. We lived there for 3 years and bought a house in Devon Park and...have lived in that same house. From the time we got married, my husband fell in love with my mother and told her that she could live with us. So we lived together the whole time. I am thankful that the Lord let her be with me all that time and she lived with me all [her] life.

....Then my husband was stationed at Paris Island, South Carolina. We went down there and rented a small trailer and I would go back and forth. I'd go down there and stay 2 weeks and come back....My daughter [was] in school and [stayed] with her grandmother and I took my son who was about 2 years old to Paris Island and stayed a while. We split it up like that while he was there. Then he was at Camp Lejeune for 9 years so that made it nice because we didn't have to move.

He was in [the Marine Corps] for 15 years and then got out. He got his job at Corning in 1966. They had just come to Wilmington and were getting ready to build their plant. He got on in maintenance and he stayed for 34 years [until he retired]. I worked at the telephone company for 10 years. And then [I worked]

part-time for an insurance man and Manpower...filling in. I worked 2 years for Dr. Poole, the eye doctor. I just worked odd jobs. I enjoy being with people.

***Family Life: Sports and the Travel Bug***

...Both [my husband] and I liked sports. We used to skate all through the years. We would go skating and we enjoy skating. We also like to go white water rafting. [Our children] never cared anything about sports. I tried to get them into it but they just don't care about sports. I tried to get them to go but they just didn't want to. They did have little church softball teams and they would play a little bit on that but they were never very good. I know my daughter liked to shop.  
(Laugh).

...[We loved to travel.] We used to, every time we had a week's vacation, we would always have to go see my husband's people in Kentucky. We never really had any vacations until 1967 when I was working for [the] insurance man and he gave me a \$50 bonus. I went to Sears and bought a tent. And from then on, we started to go. We got the bug. We couldn't afford to stay in motels but we could afford to go to the campgrounds and pitch that tent and that's how we started taking our vacations. And then we did move up to a little pick-up camper trailer. And then a smaller trailer and then a little bigger trailer. And then after [my son] had his accident, we never used the trailer anymore or went camping anymore but we were able to stay in motels and that worked out. That worked out good.

***“The Accident”***

....My son loved the water. We used to have a small boat. We would go over to Masonboro Island and have cookouts a lot....A friend of his had gotten a boat and one day he wanted to go over and do that. He asked, “Can I have some steaks out of the freezer?” I said, “Sure.” So I got him a few T-bone steaks that I had in the freezer and they started over there. Something happened where they had been...dredging over there, and they had dredged up a sandbar...He had dived and he didn’t know that the sandbar was down there...He broke his neck and was paralyzed. So it was sad. About quarter till 5 the phone rang. [It was] the hospital. [They said], “Come immediately.” And so we went. He was in the hospital for 3 years. He had to be flipped over every 2 hours all night long....He was at the point of death many times. He started throwing up black [stuff].

It was hard on my mother. She just couldn’t accept it. She was in the hospital shortly after that. They were both in the hospital and I had to run from one room to the other to try to be with both of them. [My mother] told the doctor to just let her die. She just couldn’t accept what had happened. But she did live 3 more years after the accident. I think [the accident] brought us closer together.... [The only way we got through it was] with the Lord, prayers; the church helped support [us].

....[My son] gets very depressed. He says he doesn’t want to live anymore and I can understand it. He had hopes that he would walk. Each day, each year kind of brought the reality that he wouldn’t... That he would never walk again. [He does]

nothing but watch tv and sleep all the time. It's a hopeless feeling. I can attest to that when I had [my] back surgery. I thought, "What's there to wake up for? There's nothing to do, nowhere to go." I know he felt like that all the time. [The] only thing I know of that he likes [is]...just taking vacations. He wants me to plan a trip to Holland for him but I haven't gotten around to it yet. My daughter loves to travel, too. We [have] started taking vacations every year. My daughter and my granddaughter. She wanted me to plan a trip to London this year but with everything, the war, we'll plan to take it next year....One wants to go to Holland and one wants to go to London so I don't know if we could combine it.

***"I'm No Better Than Anyone Else to Suffer."***

....I thought that when my son had his accident and left him paralyzed that that was my tragedy and I wouldn't have any more tragedies, but it didn't work that way.... I'm no better than anyone else to suffer....Because my grandson, my 16 year old grandson, was killed. That was so devastating because I used to babysit him. He was just like one of my own. He was such a wonderful boy, promising future, never missed a day in school for 12 years...On the honor roll. Had all these plans for a wonderful life. How can you not ask why? It still hurts. It's a hurt that never goes away.... I do know that after that happened, I did become a nicer person. You never know; anything can happen so fast....Your life can be gone....[Or] changed.

....[I had a near death experience myself.] [Me and] a friend of mine, we had been on the sound side swimming and we decided to walk across the street and go

into the ocean. It was a beautiful day and we had no idea the riptide was that strong. We just lay there and floated and floated and just let it carry us on out and then we tried to get back in [and] then we couldn't get in. Both of us were screaming and hollering.....It just seemed kind of hopeless...But suddenly out of nowhere a child appeared on a raft. I guess the riptide had carried her out on the raft and I grabbed hold of that and later somebody came and saved us. At one point I thought I was going to die and I thought, "Well, I wondered how I would die, and I guess this is it." Everyone has to die sometime. Some go sooner than others.

***"I Couldn't Wait."***

....I just want to enjoy every chance I get to do anything....[I couldn't wait to turn 55.] I kept seeing in the local paper that they had activities for...55 and older and I said, "I can't hardly wait to get to 55 so I can get in some of these activities. When I got 55, I saw that they had a tone and tighten class and my friend and I needed to lose weight so we thought we'd check that out. So we started going and, before they finished the class up, here comes the cheerleaders in. I stayed a few minutes and watched them and I thought, "Hmm, that looks like fun to be involved in that. So I joined that. Then I found out they had the tap class. But you know when I joined both of those, it was 1 day a week and I liked that. I wasn't in it but 3 times because I needed some free time. Now they have changed both of them to twice a week.

I figured all these activities for seniors were going to be fun which they were. So I was so excited. I loved all the things they offered for the seniors. [I joined cheerleading in]1988. Oh, I thought it was so much fun and [Natalie, the director] asked me if I could do the cartwheel and I said, “Well, I used to could. I hadn’t done it in many years. So I found out that I could and then her mother, [who] was 10 years older than me, started doing the cartwheel, too. So both of us did the cartwheel together which was very effective. And splits. Both of us did splits. [Before I joined], I had not seen [the cheerleaders] perform. It was fun...We performed at churches at the senior citizens’ meetings that they would have [there]...They would always have a covered dish and we enjoyed eating.

***“The Longest-Running Member”***

....I’ve been in the longest of this group here...There were some in before me that dropped out. Some had died and some have got their feelings hurt, I think.... [One of the original ones had real bad health.] She came in about a month ago. She’s almost blind and she’s very weak and frail. She’s 83 now. She joined in ’82. She loved it. She used to get up on our legs [like Esther] because she’s real little....That broke her heart when she had to give it up. [When I joined] there may have been 9 cheerleaders, and then 4 more came....Natalie was always out recruiting. She was a very good recruiter. You couldn’t say no to her. She would go out and find people and ask them to do it. Everybody loved her and they would do it for her....[And once they got in], they enjoyed it and the fellowship of getting together and socializing. They would have parties from time to time and celebrate

people's birthdays and, so, we just [became] kind of like a social group....A sorority or something like that.

***“Everybody Loves a Cheerleader.”***

We have a lot of fun. We just love to get together and practice and perform. And everybody loves a cheerleader, especially when we go to the Azalea Festival and perform for the Queen. They'd go crazy. We had a big group and they really loved us....Now we have [had] some derogatory people that think we are old women trying to act young. We have heard comments like that. So we do live with that. It doesn't bother me but I think it's not nice to be like that. I don't care if that's the way they feel about it. That's their business and a lot of people are derogatory.... If that's the way they feel, that's okay. I don't care. It's fun....We're having a good time....We bring happiness to a lot of people and just because they want to act like that, that's their business. (Laugh). They don't have to watch.....We are very well received [at the Azalea Festival] and appreciated. They are amazed.

***Committed: “Let Your Word Be Your Bond.”***

[After Natalie left], we didn't have a leader for a long time. Nobody would do it. People were discouraged. They had to drop out, too. I stayed in because I really loved it. And [Dolli] had stayed in too. She's been in a long time. She came in just shortly after I did....I never miss unless it's something important. I've always felt like that whatever I say I am going to do, [I do]. I don't like wishy-washiness. Let your word be your bond.... When [Natalie] found out her husband

was being transferred and she would be leaving, she said that she thought I would be the best one to take over the cheerleaders. That's the way it happened....But I did not know how to choreograph any new routines. All we could do was to practice what [Natalie] had taught us which I knew those by heart and I could help people with that...We were at a stalemate....Because nobody was teaching us anything, we lost a lot [of members] then.

....[The next director between Natalie and Martha] did not know cheerleading.... I loved her to death [but] she did not know how to choreograph. So all we could do was keep practicing the routines that Natalie had taught us....And we were supposed to learn a new one every year to go to Raleigh. You cannot perform the same one twice.... [Now, Martha] is very good at choreographing. If [Martha] quit and we don't have someone to choreograph routines for us, we just can't go on.... I just don't know how long we could stay together if we didn't have someone and [Martha] is the best one. [Natalie] was wonderful but Martha has the best ideas for she has worked with cheerleaders at school, so she has a lot of experience. [And she was a cheerleader, herself, for many years.]

....[One reason our squad hasn't built back up is that] it's just hard to get somebody. I think that people probably are busier now and they don't want to commit. They don't want to commit to 2 days a week. They don't want to give up that much of their lives. I've had people tell me they would but they didn't want to come but 1 day a week. This new lady, she said she would be interested, but

she didn't want to tie up 2 days a week. I feel like I need to be here every time I get a chance. [As captain], I do feel that I must be more committed than, maybe, the others. If I plan to do something, I try to do it. I never miss, just saying, "Oh, well, I don't feel like going today." I never do that....Even if I'm half sick, I'll still come....I feel like it's a honor and I appreciate it and I want to do the best I can. And I'll try to help everybody I can, whatever I can do.

***"I Don't Compete Just for a Medal."***

I always look forward to going to Raleigh and competing in the Cheerleader Showcase. I've always liked competition....I love to watch the other cheerleaders do their thing, get ideas, meet them, and be friends with them and look forward to seeing them every year.... It's always exciting to win 1<sup>st</sup> place [but] I don't [compete] just for a medal. It's just nice to compete and do the best you can and hope to be the best.... I love to perform, too. I like to make people laugh and I like to bring happiness and cheer to others, especially to nursing homes. They appreciate it.... My mental picture [of a cheerleader] is to root people on and to bring happiness and cheer to their lives and a little laughter....We go to the nursing homes and...I make sure [that] I go around and shake their hands and visit them. Even though they may be half asleep or look like they're not paying attention, [I] go grab their hand and pat it. And try to emit love to them....I think my gift is exhortation.

***“I Didn’t Know Anyone Was Paying Attention.”***

....People are amazed that old people can do something.... I’m very thankful that I can do what I can do. When I was sick, I didn’t think I would ever be well, but I feel great now. If you have good health, you have the world at your hand. My back still hurts a little but I’m used to it. I never thought about doing [this], but I took acrobatics as a child. I knew that I loved anything like that, but I didn’t ever think I’d be doing the cartwheel at 65 and up. It’s so easy, it’s nothing. It just comes naturally. If I could just wear long pants. I hate my big thunder thighs when I do the cartwheel. (Laugh). I’ve seen the pictures. I don’t like what I see. (Laugh). I have always been surprised through the years if I would be up there at the games and total strangers would come up and say, “Aren’t you the one that did the cartwheel and split?”.... I didn’t know anyone was paying attention.

....[People do notice.].... I can remember years ago when I was playing softball that one of the players was in the dugout and one of them said some ugly words. [He] said, “I’m sorry, Corky. I didn’t mean to say that.” I said, “You don’t need to apologize to me; you need to apologize to God.” They recognized that I did not want to hear what they had said....Then, when my daughter [got] married and [I was taking] a course in upholstery at Cape Fear Tech...I came back and told [my classmates] how I handled [a problem during] the wedding, and the teacher said, “I can’t believe that you handled that [that way].” I don’t know how she had it worded but like that I was a Christian and how I handled it...and she didn’t even know. I hadn’t said anything about being a Christian and I thought,

“Well, how did she know that?”....That made me feel good because I didn’t know I was giving a Christian witness. I always try to...be careful what [I] say and what [I] do.

***“Gung Ho and Playing All My Life ”***

....[I am naturally enthusiastic and energetic.]....I guess it’s in my genes.... I’ve always had a lot of energy. I’ve always been bursting with energy. I don’t think I have as much since I started taking high blood pressure medication. And I hate that. But the doctor said I need to take it. I love to feel good and hold that tennis racket tight and slam that ball. (Laugh)....I’ve always been this way. I’ve always been gung-ho on everything. Gung-ho....And my mouth is my besetting sin. [I] say what I think before I think and I put my foot in my mouth. (Laugh). And I’ve wanted to take back words that I’ve said many times. (Laugh). Sometimes I wish I wouldn’t speak so quickly and I would stop and think what I’m going to say....It comes out before I think and then I’m always apologizing. I’m an optimist....and my husband is a pessimist. He keeps me down a little bit....I’m very impulsive, so he helps hold me back. [I always say] when life gives you lemons, you make lemonade....[I] always look on the bright side and I figure if something bad happens...it is for a purpose.

[I want to] stay as active as I can as long as I can.... I just want to enjoy every chance I get to do anything....I’m having a good time every day....I don’t see any point in quitting [cheerleading]; if you’ve got good health, but you never know from day to day when your health is going to go.... If I came in a wheel chair, I’ll

be doing this....[But if I couldn't play sports or cheer,] I would accept it and move on and do the best I could. Whatever comes my way, I would be willing to accept it and thank Him for all the years that I had. I would know that's the Lord's will. I would make lemonade out of it. I would do whatever I was able to do. I probably would try to straighten up my house a little bit. (Laugh). I've let everything go. [I've been] having fun and playing all my life.

### Corky's Life Theme

“Everyone loves a cheerleader” and everyone loves Corky. Not only is she the squad's captain, but Corky is the epitome of cheerleading excellence and truly a cheerleader's cheerleader. Corky said that she was indulged all her life by her mother and then by her husband. Such indulgence produced a confident, enthusiastic, fun-loving, highly spirited individual who desires to live life to its fullest. Corky referred to herself as being “spoiled rotten” and that she has been “playing all her life”. Playing was a consistent theme in Corky's life.

Family was important to Corky. She was adopted as an infant. Her father died when she was 11 years old, leaving her mother to raise Corky alone. Her mother provided a modest income for her daughter through the use of her sewing skills. Corky complimented her mother on being an excellent seamstress. She and her mother were very close. Corky had never known life apart from her mother, as her mother lived with Corky and her husband up until her mother's death. The fact that Robby would love and care for his mother-in-law and take her into his home spoke volumes about his love and

devotion to his wife. Corky was loved and well cared for all of her life. She may not have had great financial wealth but she was rich in love and security.

Sports, particularly those involving a ball, were high priority for Corky. Before she met her husband, Corky had a love affair with softball. She became interested in playing softball at a young age when her mother took her outside and started throwing Corky a ball and letting her hit it with a stick. From that day forward, Corky became “wacko over anything with a ball.” Hers was an active life. She played almost every sport- baseball, volleyball, table tennis, tennis, basketball. Again, if the sport involved a ball, Corky was all over it. She said that she had “always had a competitive spirit.” She has approached each sport and activity with commitment and an attitude of “I’ll try to give it my all.”

Family, faith, tragedy, travel, and sports were all recurring themes in Corky’s life. Corky has experienced severe tragedy in her life. Her son, around age 21, was involved in a diving accident which left him paralyzed. He was near death many times during his long hospital stay. She cared for both him and her mother during that difficult time and continues to care for her son by providing him enjoyment in life through travel. After her son’s devastating accident, Corky thought that she “wouldn’t have any more tragedies.” However, her teenage grandson was killed in an automobile accident.

Although Corky’s faith was severely tested during these events, she remained faithful to her Christian beliefs. She always believed that everything that happens is in God’s purpose or plan. She felt that the tragedies brought her family closer together and actually changed the way in which she approached others. She was kinder to her son-in-

law and began to actively seek people to encourage. Corky has continued that search for those who need cheering up. She has been named by two of her team mates as the person responsible for their becoming cheerleaders. Corky has been actively recruiting other cheerleaders since she joined the squad some 15 years ago. She has also been recruiting others into the Christian faith by her example and lifestyle witness.

Corky's children did not share their mother and father's enthusiasm for sports. They did, however, share their parents' love of travel and continued to travel together as adults. Corky's travel plans have expanded from their modest camping trips with tents to traveling abroad to exotic places like Australia, Bangkok, and Mexico. Her future plans include London and Holland. Corky has involved her team mates in travel, as well, inviting them on various church sponsored trips. The latest trip to Nashville involved three of the cheerleaders. Needless to say, practice was cancelled that week.

Corky's family has always been important to her. She met her husband at a skating rink and they have been skating together ever since. They have enjoyed various sports and activities over the years, including white water rafting. Corky's cheerleading talents have been passed on to her granddaughter who is a cheerleader for UNCW. Her grandchildren are generally involved in traveling with Corky and Robby as are her daughter and son. Corky's son, now in his late forties, has lived with his parents most of his adult life.

Corky's participation in cheerleading was a natural outgrowth of her other athletic activities and interests. For Corky, sports was a way of life, as was activity of all types. Corky described herself as "bursting with energy." As an energetic senior, she has felt

like “a teenager trapped in an old woman’s body.” That “old woman’s body” has astonished and entertained crowds of all ages with its ability to effortlessly perform cartwheels and splits. Corky approached her senior years with anticipation, enthusiasm, and a playful attitude. She could “hardly wait to get to 55 so [she] could get in on some of [the] activities” that she saw advertised for seniors. Along with cheerleading, she has participated in exercise programs, dance classes, karate, and almost every type of senior activity possible. Corky wanted to do it all.

Corky thought that cheerleading would be fun. It looked very inviting to her when she saw the cheerleaders’ practice, so she decided to join them. Over the years, she has found it to be fun and rewarding. Corky has been a member of the squad longer than any of the other cheerleaders. She has cheered under 3 different directors and has seen the group go from 13 to 4 and back up to 6. She has weathered the loss of sister cheerleaders through sickness, death, and conflict. She has remained loyal to her cheerleading commitment as she has to all the other commitments in her life--family, church, friends, dance, and other athletic activities. Loyalty has been a consistent theme throughout Corky’s life.

Corky has been the constant in a time of change. She has brought stability to the squad. Her naturally optimistic outlook on life is a plus for her team mates. Corky has been an excellent choice for the squad’s captain. She has worked on delivering correction in a more gentle way, producing better results in all her relationships. Corky has the ability to self-correct and doesn’t ask more of the team than she herself is able to deliver. Over the years, Corky has worked on using her tongue to build up others rather

than to tear them down. Cheerleading has brought Corky yet another outlet for unleashing her energy in fun, play, and healthy competition. Corky brings to the squad her loyalty, her zest for life, her optimism and outgoing personality, and her high level of commitment. Corky has approached cheerleading in the same way that she has approached all of life: “I just want to enjoy every chance I get to do anything.”

### Squad Profile

#### Introduction

The preceding profiles introduced the cheerleaders individually and presented their unique talents and strengths, their personal pathways to cheerleading, and the personal meaning that cheerleading held for each of them. The squad profile takes a more collective approach, focusing on commonalities of the group and how the squad functions as a unit. The coordinator’s comments are shared to offer a leader’s perspective of the group. The profile begins with the history of the squad and concludes with a brief summary.

Included in the profile are portions of the group interview in which team members responded to the cheer they performed at the state competition. The interview provides insight into the squad’s perceptions of aging, the senior experience, and cheerleading. Excerpts from interviews with former cheerleaders are included to reflect changes that the squad has undergone since its beginning nearly 20 years ago. I have used the actual words of the informants when appropriate. I added my own words in brackets for greater clarification and used ellipses to indicate omission of the actual words of the speakers. I extrapolated the most meaningful portions of the interviews with the squad director and

the cheerleaders to portray a realistic caricature of the squad. The squad profile is based on interview data, observation, and document analysis.

### Presenting The Wilmington Golden Pom-Pom Cheerleaders

Hi, hello. And how do you do

The Wilmington Cheerleaders welcome you

With a great big H and a capital I

Wilmington says

H – E – L – L - 0

### Squad's Historical Background

The Wilmington Golden Pom-Pom Cheerleaders, open to adults 55 and older, was an outgrowth of the Senior Games, a health promotion program for senior adults sponsored by the City of Wilmington Parks and Recreation Department and the New Hanover County Department of Aging. Local games are held in the spring of the year. The senior athletes participate in a wide range of events including the Silver Arts competition, which encompasses the Visual, Literary, Performing, and Heritage Arts. The athletic events include archery, badminton, basketball, golf, tennis, table tennis, racquet ball, swimming, and track. This list in no way covers the variety of athletic activities offered as part of the Senior Games. Local finalists have an opportunity to compete in the State Finals in Raleigh, North Carolina in the fall. The state competition is usually held in late September or early October. The North Carolina Senior Games (NSCG, Inc.) is sponsored by the North Carolina Division of Aging.

The Senior Games by the Sea program began in the Wilmington area in 1983 and is part of the network of local games sanctioned by the NCSG, Inc. The Senior Games program encourages older adults to stay active, renew old skills, and maintain a positive outlook on life. The activities focus on fitness, fun, and friendship. In keeping with the spirit and focus of Senior Games, the sponsors of the program decided to use cheerleaders to cheer for the senior athletes at local and state competitions. The sponsors also decided to create a separate cheerleading category as one of the athletic activities included under the auspices of the local games. As a result of the combined efforts of city and county, the Wilmington Golden Pom-Pom Cheerleading Squad was born. The first coordinator of the program was hired in 1986. The cheerleading coach was also the Recreation Specialist for the City of Wilmington. Practices were held in the county's senior center facility.

#### Early Beginnings: Birthing a Cheerleading Squad

The Wilmington Golden Pom-Pom Cheerleading Squad was born in 1985, the brain child of the City of Wilmington and the New Hanover County Department of Aging. The first parent the squad knew was Natalie, who became its first coordinator and coach. Natalie was a former high school cheerleader and held a degree in recreation therapy. When Natalie was hired, the squad was a mere vision of what it would become under her leadership. Natalie's goal for the squad was to create a showcase for senior talents, skills, and strengths. She was a proud parent and wanted the public to know what seniors could do. She also wanted seniors themselves to know what they could do and to be proud of their own accomplishments.

Natalie was an ardent recruiter. She started out with 7 individuals who had signed up to become senior cheerleaders. With Natalie at the helm, the squad soon grew from 7 to 15 members. Natalie even recruited her own mother. Natalie encouraged the team members to try new things. She continuously challenged them to come up higher and to exceed their own expectations of what they thought they were capable of doing. The squad's routines consisted of dance steps, tumbling, stunts, and pyramids. In 1993, the Wilmington Golden Pom-Pom Cheerleaders competed against other cheerleading squads from across the state and won the gold medal. The squad was earning a reputation for excellence.

Natalie was a talented, hard-working, and energetic coach. She worked with seniors at a time when being a senior wasn't always considered "cool." Natalie's desire was to inspire the senior cheerleaders and the crowds who saw them perform. Natalie's mother, who was also a cheerleader, had this to say about her daughter's leadership:

She just had all kinds of ideas and wanted it [the squad] to flourish. She wanted to do everything, more than she had time to do. But she did it. She put her heart and soul into it....The cheerleaders were her special group....She insisted on everybody trying something. She informed you that you were going to do. If some of them didn't, she'd say, "Well, Mama, you'll have to do it."

It was an active group, going and doing all the time. The senior squad quickly gained recognition in the local area and across the state. The squad performed at area festivals, nursing homes, schools, church and community events, college basketball games, the County Fair, and various fund raising events. The senior cheerleaders became a hit at

Wilmington's renowned Azalea Festival, where the group performed for the Azalea Queen and her court and participated in the Azalea Festival Parade.

Natalie was a natural cheerleader at heart and continued to encourage and challenge the cheerleaders to surpass their known limits. She continued to motivate the squad up until the time she left. Natalie's husband was transferred out of state, so regretfully, Natalie resigned her position and moved away with her husband. Before she left, she had asked one of the cheerleaders to serve as team captain and to lead the squad in her absence. The squad floundered a little during that time. The captain was an excellent cheerleader and knew all the routines very well but felt she could not teach the squad any new cheers. For a period of time, the squad continued to practice the same routines and, actually, got into a bit of a rut until the next coordinator came on board. While a likeable and capable person, the new coordinator lacked the cheerleading background and choreographing skills of her predecessor. She managed the squad as best she could with the resources that she had. She was in the position only a short time.

The squad suffered some losses during the interlude between coordinators and struggled to maintain their previous performing level. Several members opted to quit, reducing the squad size to 6. By the time the third coordinator was hired in 1998, the squad consisted of 6 cheerleaders. The number went down to 4 for a while, then back up to 6.

### The Original 15: Pioneer Spirit

Harriet and Rachel were two of the original 15 Golden Pom-Pom Cheerleaders. Rachel was Natalie's mother. Harriet was the first to volunteer to become a senior cheerleader.

It was something I always wanted to do. And it was different. I was still working part-time when I joined so I had to go to practices on my lunch hour....We were all dedicated. We never complained about having practice and getting ready for competition in Raleigh. We put cheering first. It was so much fun. We traveled to the nursing homes and schools. We all worked hard. We did what we were asked. Over the years, Harriet saw changes in the commitment level of squad members and in how the cheers were executed.

Some of the newer people complained about practicing in the summer and where they were going to stand in line. It changed when newer ones came on board.

What they're doing now is not cheering. Back then, cheering was more physical. Harriet described her former days as a cheerleader. Since Harriet was petite, she was on the top of the pyramid.

I had two holders. They helped me get on Teresa's shoulders. I draped my legs around her neck. Then sometimes I would stand on someone's knee or back.

We all had parts and things we were good at. Corky and Renee did the cartwheels. Rachel did the splits. We had ladies performing when they were 80. Cheering now is not the same.

Harriet talked about the proper way to cheer. She had attended a cheerleading camp

one summer and learned much about cheerleading.

When you are holding your arms overhead, you hold them close to your ears. That's how you know they're straight. And you always keep your thumb inside when you're making a fist. And your hands should be like knives when you are moving them.

Harriet loved cheerleading and she loved the joy and encouragement that cheerleading brought to others.

It was fun. It was saying, "See what I can do, you can do it too." I liked bringing joy to the audience. When you're performing, you should communicate joy and enthusiasm. You should love what you're doing and that should come across to the audience.

Because cheerleading was such a vital part of Harriet's life for such a long time she has requested to be buried in her cheerleading uniform. She wished she still could cheer but is unable to because of health problems: "The mind's willing, but the body isn't able." Harriet said, "Inside I still feel like I'm 35. When I look in the mirror I still see myself as I was at 35. I'm just in an old body."

Rachel was recruited by her daughter to be a senior cheerleader. Her daughter had been trying for some time to get her mother to join the team, but she didn't join until a friend of hers said that "if Rachel will, I will." Rachel was a little hesitant to join but once she did, she "enjoyed it a lot" and found it to be "very rewarding." Rachel felt "proud to know that [she] was making people happy." Rachel did acrobatics as a child, so she was a natural for the cartwheel, the back bend, and the split. Their routines included "a lot of

dancing.” Natalie’s purpose for the group was to “have fun and exercise.” Rachel said that Natalie “wanted everybody to be fit and most of them ended up doing more than they thought that they could do.” The group soon gained recognition and numerous requests to perform.

We went down to Kinston where my mother was in a nursing home. After we performed, we got a write up in the paper. It was the first time we got a full page spread. There were three generations at the nursing home--my mother, me, and Natalie. We were on tv. When my cousin saw it, she asked someone, “Is that [Rachel] that’s a cheerleader, is that our [Rachael]?”

The original uniforms were much longer than the newer ones worn today. According to Rachel, the older style was “not attractive.”

A lot of the old women said, “I’m not wearing those short things.” The length was down. As time went by and they started doing more and going more, they got enraptured, I would say. Things began to change. Then Natalie decided that they were going to have some more uniforms so she designed them herself and got the material and had what she wanted done. They were short. There was a vest and shirt. The pleats were in different colors and difficult to do. The front was one color and the back another. They were very attractive, red and gold. [We] had a lot of comments because nobody in the state had it. We actually got it started at the state level and started having the cheerleader showcase at the state games.

Rachel is not cheering anymore. She quit the squad not too long after her daughter moved. Now when Rachel is asked about being a cheerleader, she says, “I’m a has been; just call me was.”

#### Molding and Reshaping: “But That’s Not Cheerleading”

When Martha took over the squad of 6, she became the group’s third coordinator. Martha graduated from UNCW with a degree in English. She had been working with the City of Wilmington for about 3 years, directing a recreation center, when the coordinator’s position became available. Martha was first introduced to senior issues through the gerontology class she took during her senior year in college. In some respects, the class prepared her for her new job, helping her to be “considerate of what the seniors want and need.”

Martha was well qualified for the job of cheerleading coach, having cheered for 10 years and danced for 7. However, she did meet with some resistance as she assumed her new position. The squad was a little “rebellious” at first and the cheerleaders “were determined to do their own thing.” Martha didn’t come in and try to change things right away. She observed what the squad was doing and then attended the state competition to see what other cheerleading squads were doing.

I basically observed and I went to...the state cheerleading competition...and [saw] that it was more a pep squad slash...line dance type thing...but that’s not cheerleading. [Having cheered and danced for many years], I know the difference between [dancing and cheerleading]. I said, “Okay. Now is my opportunity.” I want them to [experience] actual cheerleading.

The group was not quite ready to follow Martha's lead. She "stood back" for a while and "let them handle it." When they went to state competition, they did not place and "they were always used to placing." When they returned, they were mad and upset. "They were blaming everyone" Martha reported. They were, however, a little more open to Martha's coaching. She told them, "I want to be your coach. Can I be your coach?....I want to show you what I feel like you can win with." She sat the squad down and talked to them about the direction she thought was best for the team.

I'm new on the block and I understand it's hard sometimes to change...certain things....I just wanted you to know that [this] isn't cheerleading to me....You all have been dancing....You are not dancers. You are cheerleaders....I will train you to be cheerleaders but I am not going to train you to be dancers because you [are] the Wilmington Golden Pom-Pom Cheerleaders. You are not the Wilmington Golden Pom-Pom Dancers. If you want to dance, you need to go to tap class. ....So I started showing them cheerleading competitions....We would sit and look at regular cheerleading competition amongst junior high, high school, and college. They were like, "I hope you don't expect us to do that." I was like, "No, no....We're going to do a smaller variation of it" and they were like, "Okay"....

### Growing Pains

Martha wanted to share her cheerleading skills with the group. She felt that she could help them become a more competitive team by teaching them routines that were different from what the other squads were doing. She wanted the squad to do more actual

cheers rather than performing as dancers. She knew this would require some reprogramming of the squad's thinking regarding their concepts of cheerleading.

So I basically started with...[observing] each cheerleader. They showed me all the things they could do. I observed each cheerleader and the qualities that I felt like they most could contribute to the squad. I observed their strengths and their weaknesses.

Two of the squad continued to resist Martha's efforts and, eventually, quit the team. That left a squad of 4, but Martha's persistence and the squad's flexibility paid off in Raleigh the next year.

It was like 6 cheerleaders and then, we went down to 4 and I said, "Well, we'll do what we can." After we ironed out all our differences and everything and I just started coaching them, and the first year that they competed [under my direction], they won 2<sup>nd</sup> place. They were very happy. Then we found out that we were 1 point from 1<sup>st</sup> place and we were like, "Oh, we're going to get them. We're going to get them next year." That following year... we did place 1<sup>st</sup> and then the next year we placed 1<sup>st</sup> and last year we placed 2<sup>nd</sup> by 3 points....I told them, "I'm happy and satisfied as long as we're placing." That's excellent....I noticed that... [the other] cheerleaders have started doing our cheers. I always have to make sure that we have a fresh and new routine....We use cheerleading music... and they still do traditional [dance] music.

Going to competition was exhilarating for Martha and the team: "You can feel the victory in the air. [If] we win, it feels so good; it's just like a brief high."

Although she is responsible for coordinating the activities for 750 seniors, Martha has a special fondness for the cheerleading squad. She spends more time with the cheerleaders than with other senior groups because she “creates their routines for them to compete and that is time consuming.” Being a cheerleader takes a certain degree of commitment, which Martha definitely sees in the current squad: “The ladies are pretty serious. It’s all fun but when they come down to do their practice and routine, I can see the level of commitment.” Some potential members were intimidated when they witnessed the squad performing their “high step competition routine.” Martha assured the aspiring cheerleaders that the squad has a “high energy” [routine] that they take to competition and more “laid back cheers, routines, and dances” performed at nursing homes.

Many of the more laid back routines include the use of traditional music and are similar to what the squad was doing in its earlier days. The earlier routines included songs like *Carolina Girl* and *Mr. Beach*, which are generally classified as beach music. The diversity of presentations tends to create more versatile performances. The squad’s performances are tailored to fit the audience. For example, at a recent birthday party, the group spelled out the individual’s name in standard cheerleading fashion: “Give me a ‘M.’ Give me a \_\_\_.” Most of the routines involve cartwheels and head stands, when space allows.

#### “A Family of Granny Cheerleaders”

After getting over those initial hurdles, Martha and the cheerleaders have become very close, more like a family. They have a mutual respect for one another. The

cheerleaders appreciate her and show that appreciation by bringing gifts to her and to her 5 year old son. Martha's son also loves the cheerleaders, whom he has known since his birth. He calls them his "granny cheerleaders." The senior cheerleaders offer Martha advice and she "normally takes it." She has found that the seniors possess "lots of wisdom." She feels that working with seniors is "a true spiritual healing" because she has learned and matured from being around so much wisdom and knowledge on a daily basis. Martha relayed a bit of wisdom imparted by the seniors, "Don't sweat the small stuff; just let it go... and whatever happens, be happy."

Martha characterized the senior cheerleaders as "very spunky, very intelligent, very energetic, and...in a sense hard core." She further described each cheerleader and the strengths which they have brought to the squad.

My oldest senior [cheerleader]...is so funny. She is the perfectionist of the group. Each cheerleader has their own personality. It all has its ingredients to add up to the Wilmington Golden Pom-Pom Cheerleaders...[Dolli] is the one that is 75. She was the oldest cheerleader until a few months ago and she's the one that's like, "Okay, we don't need to do this; we need to do that we don't have time to take a break right now." ....She's the whip cracker. She drives it. (Laugh)

As Martha described each cheerleader and her contributions to the squad, the respect and admiration was evident in her voice. She mused over the antics of Corky and Dolli who banter back and forth and tease one another good-naturedly. Martha's husband described the cheerleaders as "hens in the chicken coop."

But then the combination of [Corky]. She's our captain and ...she and [Dolli] have

been...cheerleaders...the longest...Oh, my goodness! They have their own...thing going on--swinging pom-poms at each other and we're like, "Okay. You two really do need to cut it out. We're trying to progress here." They are so funny sometimes. We're like, "If we can put up with you two." It's so funny.

Martha enjoys having a good time with the squad. The age difference doesn't seem to matter. Martha is in her early thirties. She continued to name each cheerleader and point out their most salient characteristics.

[Sonia]...recently quit....I think she's going to come back. She's had some health issues but I'm praying that she comes back. She was the creative one. She carries a lot of energy. She has an inner strength that really was an asset to the squad. [Catherine] is the very intelligent, very wise...one...[that says] "Okay, we can do this." She is the inspiration as well as Corky. Corky, being that she is the captain, is the one that really exemplifies that leadership quality. She is the one that, okay, if we can't remember, we know that [Corky] knows....I do put a lot of stress on her....Getting that 5 minute routine down pat...so they know when I put the pressure on [Corky], everybody is really trying to fall into [it] after that....Corky feels the pressure....Now, Esther, she's our happy-go-lucky one. She's the joy of the squad. We have our days when we are just totally out with each other and Esther will be the one to say, "Well, you know what?" and that calming voice, she's just so soothing. She's the peacemaker and Catherine is the peacemaker. Now Rose...is the newest cheerleader. She is 77. She's been with us a couple of months and she's really learning how to hang in there. She shows she's very

dedicated; she shows a deep interest in it.

Martha relayed that many of the cheerleaders joined the squad because of health issues: “They wanted to get their minds off of it.” They have “cured” a lot of their ailments by getting out and becoming more active. Many of the cheerleaders were already athletic and quite involved with various activities before coming on the squad.

[Corky] is the athletic one...She’s into every sport you can think of...[Catherine] was a cheerleader in high school. [Rose] is the bowler. [Dolli] plays tennis.

[Dolli]dances and [Dolli] is a cheerleader...[Corky] plays tennis, volleyball.

[Corky] is in the majority of my activities. Plus [she] is a traveler. It seems like

[she] travels 100 times a year....[Sonia] works at her church....She’s...[into]

genealogy....[Sonia] is very big into her family....[Catherine] volunteers at the

Humane Society...and she’s into china [dishes]. And she’s into traveling. [Esther]

sings in the choir at the church. She also volunteers at [the] senior center at [the beach].

Martha prefers working with a smaller squad rather than one as large as the earlier group of 15. Her “ideal squad” would have 8 members because “eight is a good number to work with.” A traditional squad may have between 15 and 18. Wilmington’s fiercest competitor has a squad of 12. Although the present squad is only two short of Martha’s ideal, she still actively recruits new members. She has advertised in the newspaper and used interview situations to get the word out that “we need more.” For the time being, Martha is well satisfied to work with a smaller squad and feels that sometimes a smaller group can accomplish more than a larger one.

I'd rather have 4 cheerleaders....I'd rather have 4 cheerleaders who love each other and get along than to have 8 that just raise some stink and we cannot get any type of progression going on....[I told them], "Don't be upset because we're small in number."....[We'll] build back up....We have a ball...I'm running a tight ship, making it like the Marines, the fewer, the prouder.

Martha's philosophy on cheerleading is that "everybody has a place on the squad" and welcomes those individuals who "felt like they couldn't [cheer in high school] because they had fat legs or something like that." The only qualification someone needs to become a cheerleader is "just more or less...have a willingness." Martha feels that to be a cheerleader, "You just have to have the heart--the heart to help others, and the heart to be caring...[and] sharing."

Above all, the senior cheerleading squad exemplifies confidence and enthusiasm. Martha stated that they "love [being in] the public eye" and they "eat up the glory." The crowds are generally very receptive to the cheerleaders. According to Martha, one of the most memorable moments for the squad was at the county fair during the high school cheerleading competition. The squad performed at intermission. "There's a part of the routine that they had to state their name and age and when [Dolli] said, '[Dolli], 75!', the crowd went wild." Martha shared that at another performance when [Sonia] stated her name and age, one male in the audience said "No way." The squad is respected for what they do and the cheerleaders are serious about what they do. Some of the former cheerleaders who had to quit because of sickness took their cheerleading activity so seriously that they have requested to be buried in their uniforms. Martha responded to

that request by affirming that the former squad members were definitely “cheerleaders at heart.”

Martha believes that most of the cheerleaders joined the squad for activity but “realized it was very enjoyable.” The squad has become well known around the Wilmington area. Martha reported that “they’re like little stars around here.” While the cheerleaders have gained recognition through their activities, the main function of the squad is community service. She feels that those who choose to participate in cheerleading as seniors have “some type of energy within them that is seeking something.” They are “seeking something good, seeking to help other people.” They may have a health issue or have lost a spouse or loved one and they “just want to gear their focus on other things...which fulfills that lacking element.” They want “to give...to share what they have in any way to help.”

Working with the cheerleaders and other seniors has definitely changed Martha’s thoughts about aging. Growing up in a rural southeastern town and seeing few contemporary seniors, Martha thought that “55 [was] old.” When she applied for her current job, she thought that she “was going to be literally helping [the seniors] up and transporting them.” She thought, “Oh, they can’t drive; bless their hearts.” After working with the seniors, she had a different perspective about older adults. She looked around and saw “people driving” and thought, “These people are functional.” During her pregnancy she found that [the seniors] “were faster than me.” She said to them, “Wait a minute; give me time to do this.”

Martha referred to the senior population as “the unknown norm.” She used that term because she feels that “a lot of seniors don’t know themselves.” Being a certain age is “really a mental state.” “It’s all in what you make it and these seniors have definitely made it.” “I think [that] I’m going to make our senior motto [something] the Southerners say, ‘Age ain’t nuttin’ but a number.’ Looking forward to becoming a senior herself, Martha believes that “it is truly a blessing to get older.” The best advice she has for seniors and potential seniors is to keep moving because, as [the seniors], say “Once you stop moving, that is it.” Martha and the Golden Pom-Pom Cheerleaders are definitely moving! Martha has a heart for seniors and a heart for cheerleading. She declared that, “I will always be a cheerleader [and] I will definitely be a senior cheerleader!”

### Summary

The senior cheerleading squad known as the Wilmington Golden Pom-Pom Cheerleaders has undergone many changes since the squad’s inception in 1985. The squad was the brain child of the City of Wilmington and the New Hanover County Department of Aging. Under the leadership of the first coordinator, the squad grew from 7 to 15 members. The group quickly gained a reputation for astonishing audiences with the amazing feats that the cheerleaders were able to do. Natalie taught them dance and cheer routines. They also did stunts and tumbling and had started working on pyramid building. The seniors were astonished themselves at what they were able to accomplish. They were quite a unique and different group.

In 1993, the squad took their 1<sup>st</sup> gold medal at the state cheerleading competition. Since that time, other squads across the state began to imitate the Wilmington group. At

one time, 14 senior cheerleading squads were competing at the state level. As their reputation spread, the squad was in demand for performances at various festivals, fund raising events, church and community functions, nursing homes, and schools. The squad was always a big hit at the annual Wilmington Azalea Festival. After seeing the group perform, many younger spectators desired to become future cheerleaders themselves. The group has inspired older and younger individuals to become the best they can be, at any age.

As with any organized group, the cheerleading squad has undergone changes throughout its 18 year old history. The squad has experienced 3 new coordinators, each with her own personal leadership style and expectations for the group. Over the years, the squad has lost members to sickness, death, family obligations, or differences of opinion. The squad has changed uniform styles 3 times. The current uniform of the Wilmington Golden Pom-Pom Cheerleaders consists of a cranberry skirt and sleeveless vest trimmed in antique gold worn with a white, long-sleeved turtle neck top. The uniforms were ordered from Varsity, a sports uniform manufacturing company.

The original uniforms were in place when the group officially came together in an organized fashion. They were simple designs with longer skirts than the contemporary uniforms. The second uniform design was created by the first coordinator and were much flashier than the first uniforms. They were red and gold and much shorter than the first ones. Through the years the squad has been committed to wearing turtle necks under their sleeveless vests to conceal aging arms and to present a neater, more attractive appearance. Other senior squads have chosen to wear their vests bare-armed without the

camouflage effect of long sleeves. The Wilmington squad remains committed to covering their arms. The fashionably designed uniforms are worn with a suntan shade of hose, white socks, and white Princess-style Reebok athletic shoes.

The current squad has 6 members. Over the years, the membership has ranged from 4 to 15. There are no specific qualifications for joining; however, a certain level of commitment is expected in terms of attending practices and performances. The current director has been flexible with adjusting practice schedules to accommodate the needs of the group. There has been some discussion in terms of reducing the number of practices to one a week to allow the cheerleaders the opportunity to do other activities which they also enjoy. The idea of having later practices has also been suggested in order to accommodate those seniors who are not yet retired. The entire squad has learned to be flexible and make adjustments as needed to accommodate individual needs on the team as well as the needs of the community at large. The squad continues to grow in knowledge of basic cheerleading and choreography skills and maintains an open door policy in its recruiting efforts. The squad is continuously at work to maintain a high level of visibility and to serve as ambassadors of inspiration, encouragement, and enthusiasm for the senior community.

#### Shared Visions: Common Themes

Commitment, flexibility, enthusiasm, a willingness to learn, a desire to reach out to others, acceptance, and team spirit are all characteristics associated with the Wilmington Golden Pom-Pom Cheerleading Squad. The squad is a blend of each cheerleader's unique personality traits and talents, all working together to form a

functional, harmonious group who have fun together while sharing a common vision and purpose. While the number of outside interests and activities vary with each individual cheerleader, there is a shared commitment to the sport of cheerleading and in maintaining a high standard of excellence when performing for and competing with others. The cheerleaders also share a strong desire to bring happiness and cheer into the lives of others. They desire to be advocates for the senior community, showing by example what seniors are capable of doing. They encourage older and younger individuals to pursue healthy, energetic lifestyles and to engage in activities that they enjoy. Having fun was another unanimous goal of the senior cheerleaders.

While the pathways that brought them into cheerleading may have differed, the purposes for involvement are quite similar. For Dolli, cheerleading helps her “stay busy.” Dolli was exposed to hard work and busy-ness through the examples of her parents. She maintained that hard working mentality all through her adult life. Her desire to work hard and stay busy has been an asset to the squad in terms of keeping the team on task. Dolli also “thoroughly enjoys” cheerleading and hopes that she is “helping others as well as [herself].” The ability to have fun and the desire to help are consistent with Dolli’s overall personality. Dolli’s playful nature lightens the seriousness of practice sessions and competition. Dolli has learned to balance work and play.

Rose found unconditional acceptance when she joined the cheerleading squad. Having felt “timid” about her height all her life, Rose was encouraged by the group’s friendliness to her and the warm welcome she received. Cheerleading has provided positive recognition for Rose. Instead of “standing out” in a conspicuous way, Rose has

gained much confidence through cheering. For Rose, cheerleading has brought her fun, laughter, acceptance, recognition, and purpose. It has “filled her life” [and given her] “something to do.” Cheerleading has provided Rose an arena for her musical abilities and her love of performing. The newest squad member, Rose has inspired her team mates and her audiences with her enthusiasm, commitment, and can-do attitude. Rose has found a new challenge in cheerleading and new friends who are supportive.

Esther found cheerleading to be a solace for her. All her life, she had been involved in community and church activities that required major planning, organization, and implementation. Esther joined the squad as a respite from the planning and organizing regimen to which she was so accustomed. It was a relief for Esther to come to practice and performances and to have fun and not have to be responsible for the activity. Esther’s outgoing personality and enthusiasm for getting involved and involving others were well suited to the activity of cheerleading. Esther’s peaceful manner brought a calming feature to the squad and provided an impetus for harmony and peace within the group. An excellent organizer, Esther had the option of using her skills to coordinate group activities without the burden of being fully responsible for an event. For Esther, cheerleading has provided an appropriate balance of work and play.

While Catherine was quick to point out that “cheerleading is not number one” for her, she shares similar goals and visions with the other group members. Catherine joined the squad in order to “stay active and get involved.” Catherine still upholds those goals although her plate has become quite full with other activities such as travel, work, and family. Catherine has learned to seek balance in her life, something she did not have

while married to an alcoholic for so many years. She is adamant about protecting her freedom to maintain that balance. Cheerleading remains, for Catherine, an activity which she finds enjoyable and does not want to give up as long as the group can accommodate her need to pursue additional interests. Catherine continues to view cheerleading as an excellent opportunity to meet physical, mental, and social needs. She sees cheerleading as providing a “purpose in life” and gives individuals “something [they] enjoy doing.” Catherine brings to the group a sense of balance and a sense of adventure. She helps keep things in the right perspective by inviting the group to look at other viewpoints and try new things. To Catherine, life is an adventure!

Corky brings energy and a high level of activity to the group. Stating that she has always been “full of energy,” her boundless enthusiasm and drive has energized the group. A natural leader, Corky leads by example and persuasively encourages others to follow. Corky is the pied piper of cheerleading! An ardent recruiter, Corky has been responsible for adding new members to the squad. When new recruits join, she continues to encourage and nurture them along the way. Her enthusiasm, commitment, and fun loving, playful nature are well suited to cheerleading. A superb athlete, Corky brings to the squad her athletic abilities, her cooperative spirit, and her disciplined lifestyle which serve to create a standard of excellence for the group in practice, performance, and competition. Cheerleading provides yet another outlet for Corky’s energy and enthusiasm. Cheerleading fits well with Corky’s naturally optimistic outlook on life, her athletic ability, and her desire to bring happiness and cheer to others.

The five cheerleaders have very distinctive personalities which, when brought together, create a uniquely well blended and harmonious whole. While different in their individual tastes and desires, the cheerleaders share similarities in upbringing and experiences. Several common themes were observed across the five individual cases. Family was a predominant theme among all five cheerleaders. Each of the cheerleaders were very close to both their families of origin and their immediate families. Esther and Corky had similar backgrounds in that they both had been adopted as infants. Dolli, Catherine, and Rose were from very large, close-knit families. Dolli was the youngest of 4; Rose was the youngest of 5; and Catherine was the second oldest of four. None of the cheerleaders had experienced divorce or separation between their parents. Their parents were actively engaged in the child rearing process and involved the children in leisure pursuits and various activities during their childhood.

Dolli's father taught his children to work and play hard; he taught them how to dance and play cards. Dolli's early exposure to a balance of work and play helped Dolli to achieve the same type of balance in her adult life. Rose's family was very musically inclined and music tended to be a focal point for parents and children, an activity which they enjoyed doing together. Music continued to be a vital part of Rose's life as an adult. Esther's parents were involved in civic activities and fraternal organizations: Esther's father was a Mason; Esther's mother was in Eastern Star; and Esther was a Rainbow Girl. Esther's father was very active in the local barber union which instilled in Esther an interest in politics, civic affairs, and professional organizations. Catherine's parents instilled in her a love for traveling, while her grandfather encouraged a sense of

adventure in Catherine. Corky's father died when she was 11 years old. Since his death, Corky and her mother became very close and were never apart up until her mother's death. Corky's mother taught her to play softball and instilled in her a passion for athletics.

Following their own parents' examples, Dolli, Rose, Esther, Catherine, and Corky are all actively involved in the lives of their adult children and grandchildren. Dolli, Rose, and Catherine were divorced from their spouses. Esther's first husband died and she remarried. Corky has been married to her mate over 50 years. Family remains an important priority for each of the cheerleaders.

A second common theme in the cheerleaders' lives was that of tragedy. Each of the five cheerleaders experienced at least one tragic or life changing event during their lifetime. Dolli's husband was unfaithful to her after twenty plus years of marriage. Rose's husband was an alcoholic and unfaithful to her. She felt forced to leave him and to raise her children on her own. Catherine's husband was also an alcoholic and unfaithful. Each of the women experienced betrayal and a sense of loss and mistrust by the actions of their mates. The break up of their marriages was particularly hurtful because each of the women had grown up with parents whose marriages had survived the test of time. Esther experienced a severe loss when her husband died suddenly at the relatively young age of 40. Esther, like Rose and Catherine, raised her children alone. Corky was the only cheerleader whose marriage remained intact for over 50 years. Her own father; however, died when she was a young child. Corky experienced 2 additional tragedies in her adult

life. Her son was paralyzed in a diving accident and her teenage grandson was killed in a car wreck.

These tragic events were life changing in the sense that the adversities molded the cheerleaders into the strong women that they are today. Having experienced such tragedy and loss, life became very precious to them and they seemed to seize every opportunity that life had for them. The tragedies in Corky's life brought her family closer together and changed her treatment of others. She became a kinder person as the result of her grandson's death.

Catherine adhered to the philosophy that "adversity can make you or break you." For Catherine, experiencing adversity seemed to make her stronger and more confident in her ability to take care of herself. It also helped to order her priorities and taught her about meeting her physical, mental, emotional, and social needs in a balanced way. Catherine's need to protect her independence was evident in the way she approached cheerleading. She was very adamant that she did not want to feel obligated or trapped by the activity to the point that she felt she had to give up those other areas of her life that were so essential to her lifestyle.

Rose became more independent and more self confident as the result of her marital breakup. Rose endured hard work and long hours to support her children. She was determined to do whatever she needed to do to take care of herself and her children. Not only has Rose recovered from the broken relationship with her husband but has made great strides in overcoming her feelings of inferiority related to her height.

Like Rose, Esther also became more independent by having to assume the sole responsibility for raising her children. Esther was supported by family and a spiritual community. Esther's faith sustained her during this and other times of adversity. Dolli had always been independent and determined to be different from the status quo. From childhood on, Dolli was a very determined and self-reliant individual. The unfaithfulness of her husband, however; shattered her world of innocence and trust. She kept hoping "that things would get better" and her husband would "get over it." Dolli's eyes were opened to a world where injustice happens and people don't always do as they should. Dolli was able to lean on her faith and her network of family, friends, and activities to see her through this difficult time.

Activity and involvement were themes common to all cheerleaders. From birth, these ladies were highly active and energetic. Dolli has maintained a busy lifestyle throughout her entire life. As she put it, "I am busy nearly every minute of the day." Her active involvement with tennis, cheerleading, bridge, dancing, church, family, sewing, knitting, and crocheting fill every waking moment. Dolli's activities have supported and sustained her during the difficult periods of her life.

Rose's life has also been filled with activities. She loved music and writing as well as baseball, volleyball, bowling, running, and cheerleading. She channeled her energy and her negative feelings about height into activities of all types. Always ready to try something new, Rose has approached cheerleading and life with anticipation and determination to "just do it." Rose's participation in cheerleading has boosted her

confidence even more and has motivated her to try acting, tap dancing, “calling” Bingo, and a desire to get involved with additional activities at the senior center.

Esther was introduced to political and civic activities early on in life. She also had a love for music. Church and school activities were also a big part of her life as she was growing up. Her busy lifestyle continued on into adulthood. She has maintained her interests in music, church activities, and political and civic affairs. Esther did not have a background in athletics per se, although she did cheer in high school in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Esther has primarily been engaged in those activities that kept her in the public eye. Wherever Esther was, things were happening. Esther has continued to maintain a high level of commitment to whatever activity she happens to be involved with at the time.

As far as Catherine’s activities go, Catherine summed it up pretty well in these words, “You know how I love to travel!” Since her childhood, Catherine has been exposed to the traveling fever. Her parents took their children on family trips and Catherine traveled frequently during her married life as a military wife. Catherine’s ongoing relationship with travel has continued throughout her life. She now chooses and makes her own traveling arrangements, traveling extensively both cross country and abroad. Catherine has been able to combine her love for family with her love of travel, as her daughter is her number one traveling companion. Catherine has incorporated her love of learning with travel, taking the time to prepare for trips by learning about the culture, language, and customs of the places that she visits.

A naturally gifted athlete from childhood, Corky has been involved in sports activities all her life. Softball was her first love. That has been replaced by tennis. Since

turning 55, Corky has been participating in practically every athletic event in the Senior Games series. She has gained national recognition as a top level table tennis player. Basketball, volleyball, badminton, softball, tennis, skating, cheerleading, white water rafting--Corky has been involved in a myriad of athletic activities. Traveling is another huge passion of Corky's. As Catherine, she has incorporated her love for family with travel, nearly always being accompanied by her husband, adult children, and granddaughter on their numerous trips.

Commitment was a major theme found in the cheerleaders' stories. Each of the women approached their life's passions with a sense of commitment and enthusiasm. Traveling, family, cheerleading, athletics, and activity were all passions reflected in the lives of the cheerleaders. Each cheerleader was committed to giving their best to practices, performances, and competition. They realized that the activity required a certain level of commitment on each of their parts. Those who did not join the squad or stay with the squad were not willing "to commit to 2 days of practice per week." Dolli believed that "you really have to be dedicated to do it [cheerleading]." As captain, Corky felt that she should be more committed than the others. She declared that she would be there "even if I'm half sick." Catherine, who stated that cheerleading was not the number one priority in her life at this time, vowed that she "would do her best" at cheerleading functions.

In the same way that these women were committed to their special areas of interest, they were all committed to their personal belief systems. Whether a spiritual belief system or a personal conviction, the cheerleaders were grounded in and their lives

revolved around their beliefs. Their personal belief system dictated how they approached life in general and how they approached their relationships and even their involvement in cheerleading and other activities and passions.

Corky and Esther shared a similar belief system in their Christian faith. That faith sustained them through periods of adversity. No matter what has happened in their lives they have clung to that unshakable faith. When their worlds were coming unglued, their faith remained the constant in their lives. Their spiritual convictions influenced the way they interpreted the tragedies in life: Both believed that whatever happens in life ultimately fits into God's purpose and plan and works together for good in the lives of believers. Corky and Esther attribute their general acceptance of themselves and others and the situations in which they find themselves primarily to their faith based beliefs. They are generally able to see the good in the circumstance or the person and "make lemonade" from life's lemons. Both Esther and Corky have optimistic outlooks on life and persuade others to view life in the same way.

A strong Christian faith was a bond that Dolli, Esther, and Corky shared. They believed that, without faith, it is more difficult for people to make it through those tough times. Dolli's spiritual background, plus her family's beliefs regarding responsibility and hard work, have instilled in Dolli the same sense of personal responsibility that her father, mother, and grandfather had. Dolli has a very strong work ethic. She has little tolerance for those people who have a "lazy attitude" and do not pull their own weight. She feels that individuals should assume more responsibility in their lives for their physical and mental health. She believes that people often bring on their own set of problems by

refusing to take the initiative to help themselves. Dolli's advice for those who live alone and are fearful is to "Get a dog."

Catherine's personal belief system involves tolerance and acceptance of people with different views, lifestyles, and customs. The beliefs that have grounded and guided her life are those that affirm and celebrate diversity. Catherine has the ability to see the other side of any given situation, whether positive or negative. Her empathy for others was evidenced by her response toward her husband after they divorced: "I really don't blame him." Catherine's ability to see various perspectives of issues have led her to appreciate each distinct experience she has had throughout her life. She told her ex-husband to not be sorry for what happened. She affirmed that, despite the difficulties and the outcome, the relationship had many positive aspects. Their children and the travels they did together were cited as prime examples of the positives of the experience.

Rose could be characterized as a champion in terms of her struggle to overcome feelings of inadequacy related to her height and the rejection by her husband. Rose's personal belief system was influenced by her past experiences and her family. Rose has worked all her life to overcome her sensitivity toward her tallness. On many occasions, Rose felt that people were staring at her and ridiculing her. Her mother set the stage for Rose's victorious spirit when she told Rose to "Stand tall and walk tall." Rose has been moving toward that goal since her mother spoke those words to her daughter years ago. Rose was determined to find her niche, a place where she would fit. She found that place through cheerleading. Rose overcame financial hardships: She persevered and was able to provide a living for her sons and raise them to adulthood, single handedly. Rose has

developed a *can-do* attitude. Her children seemed to have been inspired by their mother's tenacity. Rose reported that her son "never lets his kids say ...I can't do it." Rose has refused to have those words in her vocabulary: "There's no such word as can't; you can do anything you set your mind to." Rose "set [her] mind on cheerleading and she did it."

Fun was a common thread found in the lives of the cheerleaders in terms of their approach to cheering and to life in general. They have learned the wisdom in playing as a way of refreshment, renewal, and healing. They have learned to balance work and play, and that playing and having fun are essential ingredients for a healthy lifestyle. Fun and playing provide a sense of reprieve, a brief distraction from the intensity of life. The cheerleaders had been taught the importance of fun and laughter through the examples of their parents. Dolli's father found that playing games and dancing were channels of relaxation after an intense day of labor on the farm. Dolli found the same type of pleasure in her various dance and athletic activities, particularly cheerleading. Dolli reported that she "thoroughly enjoys" cheerleading and her playful antics with her sister team mate, Corky, provide evidence to support cheerleading as a source of fun and play.

Rose's parents engaged in musical play on a regular basis, through singing, dancing, and playing musical instruments. Engaging in musical activities provided a basis for friendship and social opportunities for Rose and her siblings as music was a focal point of family and neighborhood gatherings. Through the years, Rose has continued her relationship with music as a healthy source of entertainment and leisure. Cheerleading has been another source of fun for Rose: She referred to her inner purpose for cheering was to "have fun."

Catherine has found fun in traveling as did her parents. She also related that family gatherings were times of great fun and enjoyment. Cheerleading continues to be an enjoyable activity for Catherine. Having fun is an ongoing goal for Catherine at this time in her life. She stressed that “at this point in my life, I want it to be fun.” She has earned that right: “I’ve put in lots of years...working, that were not such fun.” Catherine has made the conscious decision to not get weighed down with the process of daily living. She has ordered her priorities and she “intends to enjoy the rest of [her] life.”

Esther’s outgoing personality radiated fun and laughter, even in the difficult times of life. Naturally good-natured, Esther tends to have a good time when interacting with other people, regardless of the activity. Esther was recruited for cheerleading during one of the activities at the senior center. Esther reported that she and her friends were “cutting up and cheering and doing crazy things.” Corky saw their antics and approached Esther about cheerleading. Esther came to practice, “thought it might be fun” and found out that, indeed, cheerleading was a source of fun and enjoyment. Esther needed a change of pace from her other activities which required extensive planning and coordinating. Esther found that, with cheerleading, she could just relax and have fun.

Corky’s high energy level, zestful enthusiasm, and optimistic outlook epitomizes fun. Whether playing ball with her mother, skating with her husband, camping with her children, swinging a bat, or slamming a tennis ball, fun and play have been mainstays throughout Corky’s entire life. Cheerleading was a natural outgrowth of Corky’s playful, active approach to life. She loved all the senior activities and thought they were fun, particularly cheerleading. From her first day of practice, Corky was sold on cheerleading:

“I thought it was so much fun.” Fifteen years later, Corky continues to have fun through cheerleading and has become an ardent recruiter for the squad, telling potential cheerleaders, “We have a lot of fun; we just love to get together and practice and perform.” Corky summed up her overall approach to life in these words: “I’m a happy, happy person...and [I’ve been] having fun and playing all my life.”

Perseverance could actually be a subtheme related to staying active and involved and being committed to people and activities that were important. Dolli was perseverant in her marriage and in rearing her children. She tried to make her marriage work despite her husband’s lack of commitment to the relationship. Dolli persevered in life by pressing on with her faith, continuing with her activities, and keeping a positive outlook after the breakup of her marriage. Catherine had a similar experience in her marriage. She persevered as long as possible in her attempts to stay in the relationship without losing her own sense of self in the process. Catherine persevered during the stormy periods in her relationship with her children. Catherine has maintained a positive attitude and has remained nonjudgmental through the healing process. Esther persevered after the death of her husband despite her critics who felt she could or they could do better in parenting her children alone. Esther persevered in the care of her aging mother and kept her at home as long as she could before moving her to a nursing care facility.

As Catherine, Rose also persevered in raising her children as a single parent. Rose was determined to do whatever it took to provide for her children: She worked several jobs and long hours to have enough income to take care of them. Rose also persevered in

her journey of self growth, always striving to be accepted, to be valued for her inner character, rather than ridiculed for her height. Certainly, Corky was perseverant following the tragedies in her life. She was loyal to her faith although she questioned why her grandson was killed and her son was paralyzed. She maintained her belief that all things fit into God's purpose and plan. Corky has managed to maintain an up beat lifestyle and continues to make lemonade out of the lemons in her life.

A final theme apparent in the narratives of the cheerleaders was that of advocacy. Each cheerleader has been an advocate for senior issues and a promoter of healthy senior living. Corky's advice to potential seniors was to "keep doing everything you've been doing all your life [and] don't give up." Corky recommended staying active as long as possible and not sitting on the couch and watching tv. Rose also advocated for activity in senior adulthood: "If you are going up in age, [it] doesn't mean you can't do something; You can do it if you set your mind to it [and] don't give up." Esther has served as an advocate for the senior community through her church work with senior adults. She provides educational programs and coordinates activities that keep seniors active and interacting with others.

Catherine had a personal interest in advocating for health and activity in later life. She witnessed her mother's declining health plummet as her mother became less and less active and less involved in the world around her. Catherine was determined to not go down the same path as her mother and has been involved in preventive measures such as exercise and weight management for a while. She tried to help her mother by encouraging her to "go to the senior center, to get involved, to do something" but her

mother refused. Catherine advocates for activity and involvement for seniors: “I truly believe that it is important for seniors to get out and get involved in something; it doesn’t have to be cheerleading.”

Dolli served as a formal advocate for seniors when she served on the Advisory Board for Senior Activities for the county’s Department of Aging. She served in this advisory capacity for approximately 7 years. During that time, she advocated for and promoted Senior Games as a vehicle for seniors to become fit and to have fun.

Dolli saw publicity for senior events as important in increasing the number of healthy seniors and in encouraging positive relations between all age facets of the community.

Seven life themes were observed across the lives of the 5 cheerleaders: family; tragedy; activity/involvement; commitment; perseverance; personal beliefs; fun; and advocacy. The cheerleaders also shared similar views regarding aging. These views were voiced during the group interview in which each of the cheerleaders was given the opportunity to respond to the words of their competition cheer. The group interview was held about a week before their state competition in Raleigh. The women reflected on the personal meanings of the words in *Senior Spirit*. The interview was taped and transcribed in its entirety. The portions of the interview that were not related to cheering or senior life were omitted. The passages below are excerpts from the interview with the Golden Pom-Pom Cheerleaders .

Linda: I want to take a few minutes and look at this cheer and look at it line for line and I want you to tell me what it means to you, to all of us. And let’s just start out with Senior Spirit, the title of the cheer. And really this is a

neat thing. It says a lot, but what does it say to you? What is senior spirit?

Dolli: It's who we are.

Rose: We are seniors and we have the spirit and we show it.

Catherine: It's our enthusiasm I think that we put into not just the routine but all of us, I think, put it into our lives.

Esther: Yea.

Catherine: And that's, we have...

Corky: We're not the typical 70ish seniors. (Laugh)

Dolli: We're glad we feel as good that we can do this.

Rose: We're seniors. We don't want to think we're old because we're not. We're young. Got that spirit and we all look young.

L: Absolutely. That's right.

Rose: And we all act young.

L: What do you think the typical 70ish person would be like?

Corky: I'd always pictured them as being a refined little old lady with a hat on her head and gloves.

Dolli: In a rocking chair.

Corky: Yea.

Rose: I saw a little lady bowling and I just questioned. I wondered how old she is. Some of them said, '60'. She looked 90. She did too. I hope I don't look that old. I don't want to look old. I didn't want to act old and I don't. I don't look like 20, but 39.

Esther: 39 and holding.

Rose: You're as old as you feel and if you don't feel old, then you're not old.

Corky: We just bowled against a lady and she was 94.

Rose: God bless her.

Catherine: Here in Wilmington?

Corky: Bowled right here at Cardinal Lanes. She's very slow but walks up there  
and lays the ball down and she'll get a strike.

Catherine: (Laugh)

Corky: She doesn't throw it. She just lays it down and she gets a strike. (Laugh)

Linda: Do you think she shows senior spirit?

Corky: Yea. She's very, very active for...94. That's really getting up there a little  
bit.

Linda: So, kind of sounds like that senior spirit encompasses a lot.

Dolli: The facial expressions really tell it all if you're happy.

Linda: So, part of it is being happy with who...

Dolli: Who you are.

Linda: And where you are, that sort of thing. Okay, y'all. What is this all  
about that we want to hear the senior spirit?

Dolli: Be excited.

Linda: Okay. Be excited. What's the senior spirit?

Catherine: Well, we want to, at least this is where I'm coming from, we want to  
convey that to other people. Hear the same sort of thing coming back

from them that we feel.

Esther: Right.

Catherine: That we're trying to convey our enthusiasm. I think to other seniors so that they can see that being our age doesn't mean the little old lady in the rocking chair any more at all.

Esther: Ha. Right.

Corky: Enjoy your life right on up. You don't have to stop.

Linda: You don't stop living.

Corky: No.

Rose: Just keep trucking along.

Linda: So this cheer is more for who? Who is this cheer for?

Esther: The people out there who's ever watching us. They need to know that we got the spirit and what's wrong with you.

All: (Laugh)

Esther: You're trying to put the spirit in them.

Catherine: Yea. There you go. That's what you're trying to convey...

Rose: I hear them saying that is fantastic. These are seniors and they have a spirit and that's what she said we're trying to convey to people.

Esther: I know when we did our thing at the church. They're still asking when are coming back.

Linda: Oh.

Esther: I said because they loved it. Never seen that much spirit, I bet.

Corky: Every time we got the ball game out here at UNCW they act like they just love us.

Rose: We did *Carolina Girls*.

Catherine: Well, I think the kids that age don't honestly believe that we can do [it]. And we used to every year since I've been here, we do one cheer where part of it was each one of individually stated our name and age.

Esther: That was last year.

Catherine: And people are amazed.

Catherine: I mean, truly, when you stop and think about it, somebody says...

Esther: Esther, 69.

Dolli: I'm 75.

Esther: Esther, 69. And afterwards, "You're not 69". Yea.

Linda: What is that like to share your name and your age, that part of yourself?

Corky: Well, I'm proud of these years that the Lord let me live.

Catherine: Me, too.

Esther: That's right.

Rose: Me, too.

Dolli: That's right.

Esther: He said, "You got it. One more year girl. Go for it."

Rose: Oh, yea.

Linda: So maybe this should be senior pride.

Esther: That's right.

All: (Laugh)

Esther: Pride. Senior spirit.

Linda: So the message that you're conveying is one of enthusiasm and pride and, "Hey, we can do it, and you can do it too." Is that message mostly for seniors?

Esther: Oh, no.

Rose: No, the young kids because they don't think we have what it takes to get out there and move. So, we try to convey to them too that we have spirit for them and the older people too. They're amazed. They look at us. Wow. They really can move. I think that pyramid's going to do the trick.

Catherine: We do perform usually once a year, twice a year, for the group at the college that are taking a course in gerontology...So, obviously it's not just for us but to show them, here again, they're specifically learning about older people and so trying to get anything out of their heads that they may have.

Linda: Like a stereotype kind of thing?

Catherine: And kids do have a stereotype very different.

Corky: I did myself. I though, well, gosh, when you get 50, you're through living.

Linda: Over the hill.

Corky: Over the hill, that's it. Want be able to do anything else. (Laugh)

Rose: My grandchildren are amazed. "My nanny is a cheerleader?" I said, "Yes." They said, "I don't believe it." I said, "Well, believe it, because I am."

Linda: And you say that with confidence and pride. Okay. So they kind of sit up  
and take notice, don't they?

Dolli: Oh, my grandchildren...

Catherine: They stand up and giggle, my kids do. "You're a what? You're doing  
what, Grandma?" That I'm doing this at my age.

...Linda: Okay, so we want to hear that senior spirit. What's it going to sound like  
when we hear it?

All: Full of enthusiasm. Vim. Vigor. Fun. Fun. Loud. Loud. Moving. Exciting.

Linda: So this is coming from the crowd. Getting them revved up.

Catherine: Hopefully.

Linda: so, when it comes back, it sounds like it's going to be alive.

Rose: I remember when we did that Carolina Girls, they were clapping and before  
we ever got off stage. They couldn't believe that we were moving. I don't  
know if I remember that now or not. (Laugh)

Esther: We're going to go over a lot of these...

Dolli: Get everything back in order.

Corky: And the Azalea Festival when the Queen comes to see us, they just love  
the cheerleaders.

Rose: Oh, yea.

Catherine: I think that's everybody's favorite.

Corky: They are really astonished.

Esther: Those young people, yea, they really...

Rose: They're amazed.

Linda: Okay. So you want to get them revved up and you want to hear that spirit.

So, it sounds like it's not so much that you want them to cheer back to you or cheering for you but for all seniors. Is that what you represent?

Catherine: Oh, yea. I think so. Yea. Absolutely. We'd like to have the cheering for us, too. (Laugh).

Linda: But you embody it, sounds like. All the senior spirit. All the seniors.

Catherine: Yes.

Linda: Is that kind of what you're saying?

Dolli: Yes. Everything. I go to my doctor, he says, 'I wish I would get the other people that come in here complaining all the time to get up and do some exercise.

Linda: Uhmm.

Dolli: They're all too heavy. They all need to get out and do something and they sit around complaining and want a pill to make them well.

Linda: He loves it when you come in.

Dolli: He does.

Esther: That's what I was waiting in Dr. Curly's at Sports Medicine where I go.

And he chews out my pain doctor. He says, "Oh, no sirree. She's not going to give that up. She can't give it up. She's got to keep active." So when I called today to change my appointment...I hear him in the background, "Well, she's going to go ahead, isn't she?" (Laugh) If you

have treatments and everything then you don't need to be doing this... even though it's not major aerobics, it's still moving and you're not letting it heal. You're not doing what it needs to be doing. So he says, "I'm not going to do anymore [treatments]." I said, "Fine, I don't you to do anymore." So then when he called Dr. Curly and told him,[he said] "I don't want her to; she doesn't need to quit."

Linda: Hmm. so you've got one pulling for you and one...

Esther: Oh, I've got a bunch of them pulling for me. Oh, yea. Oh, yea.

Linda: Sounds like you're defying the odds.

Esther: Right.

Linda: Defying people that want to keep you down. So why are you doing that; why are you defying your doctors?

Esther: 'Cause I know in my self, my being, I cannot sit. That would be the worse thing for me to do...

Corky: Exactly.

Esther: ...would be for me to sit. Because once I stop, that would be it...

Catherine: That's what happened to my mother. I mentioned that to you in one of our interviews. We just watched her. We begged her to get out and do something. Go to the senior center. The facilities were there. She just wouldn't do it. And you could just watch her just steadily going down hill until she got to the point that she couldn't get out of bed.

Rose: Yea.

Catherine: And that's a sad way to see someone go....She was 90 when she died.

She had been in bed the last 5 years.

Corky: Is that right?

Dolli: And that makes it hard on the family.

Catherine: Oh, yes. So, that's why when the doctor might say, "Slow down" and you don't, you know your own self better. That's not healthy.

Esther: That's right.

Linda: You kind of know what's best for you.

Catherine: Well, (laugh) to a certain degree.

Esther: To a degree, that's it.

Linda: Use good sense. Well, it sounds like you're saying that you all are not sitters; you're cheerleaders.

Esther: We are. I mean we're doers.

Rose: We have to keep moving because they say if you don't use it you lose it.

Esther: That's right.

Rose: Legs going. Arms going.

Catherine: I just joined Curves. Did I tell you that?

Corky: ....Is that fun?

Rose: Do they monitor you in anyway?

Catherine: Oh, yes. They've already taken all my measurements and all that....

If I put your name in then you'll get a coupon.

Linda: Watch out for each other.

Corky: Put one in there for Dolli. She needs to go. (Laugh)

Catherine: Well, I will. If you go down and you decide you don't like it, that's fine.

Corky: Dolli's got the problem.

Dolli: I don't have the time.

Esther and Linda: We want to hear that senior spirit!

Linda: All right. Let's talk about Rub-a-dub-dub.

Esther: Okay. Rub-a-dub-dub. It's part of living.

Linda: What's this about? What does this mean to you? Rub-a-dub-dub, put 'em in the tub. Wash 'em, scrub 'em, hang them on the line. What's all that saying to you?

Corky: They did that when I was recuperating from my back surgery. So I didn't find out about it until you had already learned it and choreographed it and everything...

Catherine: But it's cute. Like it says hanging with the seniors is mighty fine.

Linda: Well, let's talk about that because we can relate to hanging with the seniors, that's mighty fine. So, what does that mean to all of you? What's it like to hang with the seniors?

Rose: Enjoyment. Come join us. Get exercise.

Catherine: Get involved.

Rose: Get out of that chair, get involved with anything.

Esther: It's our age group...

Rose: Get involved with anything that moves your body. Over here they have this thing...

Catherine: Tai chi.

Rose: Be involved with something besides sitting in front of the television and dying.

Catherine: Vegetating.

Rose: I saw my brother do that. I saw my sister do that. But I would swear I wouldn't do it. Both sat in the chair and watched tv and die.

Corky: I can't just sit there and watch tv. I've got to be doing something, reading the paper, straightening up. I can't just sit and watch tv. I'm too hyper.  
(Laugh).

Esther: I do the same thing. I get up, Dan says, "Where you going?" [I say] "I'll be back in a minute." "Well, you're going to miss..." "Well, that's okay. I'll catch up." (Laugh)

Linda: So you've got to be doing.

Esther: Doing.

Linda: Moving.

Dolli: Well, I never just sit. I'm knitting anytime I'm sitting and watching tv.

Catherine: Well, that's great. That's what my mom used to do. She would knit and crochet.

Esther: Yea.

Linda: Always busy. All right now. How about this standing up, getting on your

feet. What does that mean in terms of...

Rose: Get up out of that chair.

Catherine: I think the same thing.

Rose: Stand up and move...We have voices.

Linda: You have voices. Talk about that a little bit.

Rose: Get up and move and do something. Even if it's running around the block

or walking down the street or riding a bicycle or walking to the store...

Just moving. Get things going. Go down to the mall, walk in the mall.

A lot of seniors, they walk in the mall. Every morning they have a walk...

Corky: I used to do that.

Dolli: And then they go to Hardee's and eat biscuits. (Laugh)

Linda: But at least they're walking.

Esther: And eat those biscuits.

Corky: They earned it. They earned it. (Laugh)

Linda: Is there something else that stand up get on your feet can mean other than  
physical activity?

Catherine: You mean mental activity?

Linda: Is that a possibility?

Catherine: Well, I suppose you could interpret it that way because it's all part  
of the senior beat. It truly is. Remain involved...Like Corky does  
crossword puzzles all the time. I've started doing those. That keeps  
the old mind active.

Corky: I love crossword puzzles.

Catherine: Read. That's the one thing they tell you to continue to read and learn.

Don't quit just because you're out of school. You shouldn't ever, ever stop learning. There's always so much to learn. In fact, the older I get, the more I realize how much more there is to learn...

Esther: There is to learn.

Linda: So it's growing.

Catherine: Oh, I'll never get there.

Rose: You've never too old to learn.

Linda: You're learning every day. Rose...mentioned something about a voice.

Letting your voice be heard. Do you think that's a part of "standing up and getting on your feet?" Having the senior voice heard?

Esther: I have mine heard all the time at church. They get tired of it. I'm preaching. When I pray, at least they say (laugh) "Good gracious." So, anyway, no. They know me. They know I'm active. They know where I'm coming from and all the activities I do with that in mind...

Linda: What's it like, though, to be heard?

Esther: Well, I think it's what you're saying or what you're trying to get across. If you're heard and if it's received in the same way you're trying to get it across, it's excellent. But, then, if you've got somebody that's looking at it with a "whatever" like, "What's she trying to do? How come she's bringing that program? We don't need that program." Well, I get that

too. And I say, “Well, I’m only one person and I’m only doing God’s work’ and if He tells me to get somebody to speak on this, fine.” If it’s on Alzheimer’s. If it’s on wills. If it’s on whatever it is. He...I pick a program but it’s getting the words out and I think, anything, if you’re a senior and you get the word out to other seniors, you’ve accomplished a lot. Because you take an audience that’s below us, I mean, the younger generation and try to give them some of this and they’re going to, they’d probably get up and walk out. They’re not really interested. They haven’t reached our plateau yet.

All: (Laugh)

Linda: So it may not be as relevant.

Esther: That’s right. That’s right. They’ve got to grow. It’s just like you talk to your children. I talk to Bobby sometimes and he says, “Grandma, get with it; I’m only 10 years old; you’re 70.” I mean...

Linda: You’ve had 60 years of living.

Esther: Yea. “I’m not there yet.”

Dolli: My children would always tell me when I get on something they shouldn’t and should do, they’d say after awhile, “Oh, Mama, get off your soap box.”

(Laugh)

Esther: That’s right.

Corky: Good for them. Yea. (Claps)

Esther: I mean, go on. Get on. Do something else. Get on with it.

Linda: Do the seniors sometimes need to get on a soapbox or at least have a voice?

Esther: Oh, yea.

Rose: Wouldn't it be nice if you'd say, "Stand up and get on your feet" and all the seniors would stand up with that spirit?

Linda: There you go.

Rose: Stand up. Yea. I'm standing. Now what?

Linda: That's a start. You're getting up.

Rose: Yea. Stand up and get that spirit.

Linda: Sometimes that's the first step--getting up.

Esther: Yea. We could say that to the audience up there.

Corky: Maybe change it and have it a little bit different. (Shouts) Stand up!!

Esther: That's right.

Corky: (Shouts) Get on your feet!!!

Linda: Catch them off guard.

Esther: Right.

Corky: (Shouts) Stand up!! Get on your feet!!! (Laugh)

Esther: That's right.

Linda: And move to that senior beat.

Rose: And you got the beat, so move.

Linda: So, what is the beat? What beat do the seniors have?

Catherine: ...Our own rhythm.

Rose: Do a bit of dance.

Esther: Yea.

Corky: That's a mistake right there. (points to typed cheer). That's not supposed to be in. Just got that beat in our feet.

Linda: Okay. All right.

Rose: Got that B-E-A-T. You got it, move.

Linda: So the beat is more individualized, moving to your own...

Catherine: Our own rhythm, yea. You can, yes. You can be a senior and be active. In fact, I have a good friend who just, when I mentioned I was a cheerleader, "Oh, that's not for me." But at the same time, she's got her own beat that she's going to. She's still very active and involved and so on. But it wasn't in this type of activity. It didn't appeal to her. But, so, it's not just being a cheerleader, obviously, but it is being involved, again, in the things that keep you thinking young.

Linda: Finding your niche.

Catherine: Yea.

Esther: Yea....Finding your niche and go with it.

Linda: Okay. All right. So, this "We got it. Seniors, we got it."

Catherine: We do. (Laugh)

Linda: So what do we have?

Rose: We got the spirit. Throwing out to the audience and to the seniors

that we have the beat, we have, what do I want to say, the enthusiasm!

Linda: Right.

Rose: And moving.

Linda: Still got it.

Rose: Yep. We got it.

Linda: Haven't lost it.

Rose: Nope.

Esther: Not yet.

Catherine. Don't plan to.

Linda: It's still there.

Esther: For a while yet.

Catherine: Got too many places to go. (Laugh)

Esther: Oh! Africa! If I could rob a bank, I'd go. (Laugh)

Linda: So many exciting things. All right. So, we got the beat and it's in our  
feet and you want everybody else to get the beat.

Catherine: Yep.

Linda: At least get connected with something.

Catherine: Of course we may be preaching to the choir....At Senior Games,  
obviously, people that are there are involved.

Esther: That's right. Right.

Linda: So where could you do this?

Catherine: We do do it, though. We do it at a lot of places, again to the young

people, certainly to let them know there's a lot of future out there for you....At nursing homes, I think, when we're doing it, we're trying to convey something to them, certainly.

Linda: Hope, maybe?

Catherine: Yea. Certainly, hope.

Dolli: Trying to cheer them up.

Esther: Cheer them up and give them something to clap about and you can see them...

Corky: Some of them are really amazed. They've got a big smile on their face.

Esther: Yea. They'll come up and smile and some of them, you can see how sad they are.

Corky: And some of them look like they're over-medicated.

Esther: Yea.

Dolli: A lot of them look like they're over-medicated.

Linda: Do you think you're bringing the senior spirit into the nursing homes sometimes when you're performing?

Catherine: Oh, I think we always do. Yea.

Esther: Because we're not quiet.

Rose: They always want us to come back.

Linda: Yea.

Rose: Some of them are over-medicated and I don't know if they are aware of where they are.

Catherine: Some of them aren't.

Esther: Some of them are just already there.

Rose: Yea. Anyway, there could be something that we're doing to spark that something in their eyes even though I've seen a couple of them. I don't know if they're on medication or what. I can credit them for bringing them into the room while we're doing our dance and what we're doing.

Linda: So, you're bringing it to them. They may not be able to get out and get all that spirit, but you're taking it to them.

Esther: The schools are a good place like I said because it shows the children...

Rose: Maybe we'll do that.

Esther: Also, we've got the nursing homes. We've got like the Salvation Army wanted us to come. We've missed a lot by not going as much as we did this year as we did last year.

Dolli: We used to go a lot more.

Linda: Well, we're going to get this spirit out here, right Rose? Going to get the spirit out and about. All right. Any last words of wisdom you want to say about this cheer or about senior spirit or anything.

Catherine: Let's keep all that we discussed right here (points to heart) when we get out on stage next week.

Esther: That's right. That's right.

Catherine: Because that will help us, I think, to convey the message, what we're trying to say.

Corky: And I hope next year that we can do more here in the area. We've spent so much time on this routine.

Esther: We did last year.

Dolli: We really should take it everywhere.

Corky: I bet the day care because the little children would love us to come.

Esther: Oh, yea.

Dolli: Oh, well, Andrew can't wait until we come to their school.

Corky: I said I always wanted to go to schools.

Dolli: He wanted us to come to the pig picking while we were still up yonder.

(Laugh) He said, "That's a bigee."

Linda: He wanted it to be fun. We want to have fun doing all this.

Esther: Well, if we're going to work and learn this and then just do it here...

Dolli: We need to do it everywhere.

Esther: Why waste all the time?

Corky: I've completely forgotten last year's routine.

Catherine: Oh, yea. And that was a cute routine.

Esther: It was.

Corky: It was the routine that started without the repetition.

Dolli: I think this one is better.

Catherine: That is, unfortunately, well, really the repetition. Let's face it. We're more pronounced on ours than when we learned something at 20.

Linda: That's probably true. But we can be comfortable with that.

Catherine: Oh, yea.

Linda: I want you to agree on one line here because I want us to close out with  
some type of cheer.

All: (Laugh)

Linda: So you pick the cheer.

Catherine: Oops.

Esther: I like rub-a-dub-dub.

Rose: Come on seniors, let's hear it.

Linda: So what will we have?

Rose: I like that one, "Come on seniors, let's hear it, spirit."

Esther: Oohh.

Catherine: Yep.

Esther: That's probably a good one.

Linda: Everybody good with that?

Catherine: Yep.

Linda: All right. (turns to Corky) You're the captain. So, you've got to lead them  
off in this. Get them ready.

Corky: Which one is it now? I don't know which one it is. (looks at the paper)

Right here?

Rose: Yea.

Esther: Come on seniors, here.

Corky: Come on seniors. Ready?

All: SPIRIT, LET'S CHEER IT. COME ON, SENIORS, LET'S HEAR IT,  
SPIRIT!!! Yea!!!!

### Summary

The cheerleaders responded to the cheer in terms of their personal thoughts and feelings about being seniors. Many similarities were seen in their responses. The cheerleaders were in agreement that healthy senior living is associated with activity, movement, and getting involved with people and things outside themselves. The cheerleaders served as a reminder to other seniors that they should be pursuing an active life style at this time of their lives. The cheerleaders' message was also directed to future generations of seniors and served as an encouragement to younger people that, if they continue to stay active throughout their adult lives, they will be healthy and active when they become older adults. The discussions during the group and individual interview tend to suggest that the senior cheerleaders are more about bringing a message of hope and encouragement to their audiences rather than performing to receive accolades, although the accolades that have been received are welcomed.

During the group interview, many of the life themes and characteristics of the individual cheerleaders were observed. Dolli pointed out what should happen, staying true to her work ethic and sense of justice and fair play. Rose demonstrated her enthusiastic "I can do it, you can do it" attitude and was quite vocal during the interview session. Catherine expressed her desire to learn and go, encouraging other seniors to continue to stay mentally active. Esther was very supportive and agreeable with her team

mates. She acknowledged and affirmed many of their responses. Corky provided the playfulness with her teasing remarks directed to her friend and team mate, Dollie.

The group session was an example of team work and how the cheerleaders worked in synch, supporting one another and playing off one another's energy. The interview was also an example of individuality and commonality. The cheerleaders approached the cheer from individual perspectives but shared a common view on what constitutes healthy living in later life. They shared the opinion that seniors need to take personal responsibility for their lives and their health. They were in agreement that younger people need to prepare themselves for the future by taking those preventive measures now. The cheerleaders viewed the squad's mission in similar fashion: The primary function of the senior squad was to communicate hope, encouragement, and senior wisdom to audiences of all ages. Rather than receiving accolades and medals, the group was more interested in giving to others by providing inspiration and motivation to their audiences.

The cheerleaders have found purpose and fulfillment in their lives through cheerleading and other activities that keep them physically active and engaged in life. The women who make up the senior cheerleading squad have found some winning ingredients for healthy living at any stage of life. The cheerleaders seem to be content with their current lifestyles and have positive outlooks on life in general. As true cheerleaders, their intent is to shout their message of inspiration to the crowds in the stands. The message they shout to their peers is that "Age ain't nuttin' but a number." Rather than a disability, age is a mind set. As Rose said, "age is mind over matter."

### Quantitative Results

Having a keen sense of purpose and meaning and a positive outlook on life has been equated to life satisfaction and physical and psychological well-being (Reker, 1994; Reker, 1997; Reker & Wong, 1984; Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987). Based on Frankl's (1978) will to meaning, The Life Attitude Profile (Reker & Peacock, 1981, as cited in Reker et. al, 1987) measures seven dimensions of life attitude or life meaning and purpose: Existential Vacuum, Life Control, Death Acceptance, Will to Meaning, Goal Seeking, and Future Meaning.

The Perceived Well-Being Scale (Reker & Wong, 1984) is a 14 item measure of physical, psychological, and general well being. Psychological well-being is defined by Reker and Wong as “the presence of positive emotions such as happiness, contentment, joy and peace of mind and the absence of negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, and depression” (1984, p. 24). Physical well-being is defined as “self-rated health and vitality coupled with perceived absence of physical discomforts” (Reker & Wong, 1984, p. 24). Subjective physical and psychological health have been linked to successful aging and life satisfaction even more so than objective indicators of physical conditions (Reker & Wong, 1994; Snowden, 2001; Vaillant, 2002).

Both the LAP and the PWB have been revised. Both revised versions were mailed to me by the developer at my request for a fee of \$35.00. The manuals and scoring instructions were included. The LAP-R and the PWB-R were administered to each of the five cheerleaders in my study. The Life Attitude Profile-Revised (Reker, 1992) consists of six dimensions associated with life attitude: Purpose, Coherence, Death Acceptance,

Choice/Responsibleness, Existential Vacuum, and Goal Seeking. Each of the 48 items on the LAP-R is rated on a 7 point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly agree” (7) to “strongly disagree” (1). The scale scores are obtained by summing item scores for each dimension. The scores on each of the scales range from 8 to 56. A high score on each dimension is indicative of a high degree of the attribute represented.

The LAP-R can be used with individuals of all ages from adolescents to older adults. The normative sample for the LAP-R consisted of 750 volunteers ranging in ages from 17 to 89 years old. Half of the sample was comprised of university students in the 17 to 24 year old range. The other half was comprised of adult volunteers from the community surrounding the university and ranged in ages from 25 to 89 years old. Percentile norms were given in the LAP-R manual for young men and women (17 to 24), middle age men and women (25 to 40), and older men and women (41 to 89).

The cheerleaders’ scores on the LAP-R were somewhat varied and fell between what appeared to be low moderate and high moderate ranges based on the overall range of possible scores from 8 to 56, for each of the scale’s six dimensions. Their scores ranged from 35 to 50 under Purpose; Coherence scores ranged from 35 to 43; and Choice/Responsibleness scores ranged from 40 to 54. The cheerleaders scored between 30 and 48 on Death Acceptance and from 29 to 46 on Goal Seeking. Lower scores were found for Existential Vacuum, ranging from 10 to 28. The Personal Meaning Index (PMI) composite score is obtained by adding the Purpose and Coherence dimension scores. The PMI relates to life goals and mission, having a sense of direction from past, present, and future events, and having a consistent understanding of self, others, and life in general.

The Existential Transcendence (ET) composite score is a global measure of attitudes toward life in terms of discovering meaning and purpose and being motivated to find meaning and purpose in life. Higher scores are reflective of a greater degree of the particular attribute. The cheerleaders' raw scores were compared to those of the normative sample of older women between the ages of 41 and 89 years old. There were no percentile scores given for the PMI and the ET composite scales. The LAP-R raw scores and percentile scores for the five cheerleaders are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

## Life Attitude Profile-Revised Scores and Percentile Scores

Cheerleader	PU/ %	CO/ %	CR / %	DA/ %	EV/ %	GS/ %	PMI	ET
Dolli	50 / 88	42 / 45	49 / 73	35 / 29	12 / 3	29 / 20	92	193
Catherine	40 / 35	35 / 18	40 / 19	30 / 21	18 / 28	45 / 83	75	172
Corky	47 / 77	49 / 86	54 / 94	45 / 76	10 / 1	26 / 12	96	211
Esther	46 / 74	43 / 50	40 / 19	48 / 86	16 / 1	29 / 20	89	190
Rose	35 / 19	43 / 50	49 / 73	36 / 30	28 / 70	46 / 87	78	181

Note: PU= Purpose; CO= Coherence; CR= Choice/Responsibleness; DA= Death Acceptance;

EV= Existential Vacuum; GS= Goal Setting. Percentile scores were derived from comparing the cheerleaders' scores to a normative sample of adult women between the ages of 41-89 years old.

According to the cheerleaders' responses during the interview sessions, I expected much higher scores on the LAP-R. Their scores were varied and fell into the low to moderately high ranges when compared to the normative sample of older women. The broad ranges in ages of the older sample (41 to 89 years old) may have skewed the distribution of scores. The only scoring information provided in the manual instructed the

score to tally the scores under each dimension: The higher the score, the greater the degree of the attribute possessed by the respondent.

Dolli's score of 50 was the highest received on the dimension of purpose, which deals with life goals and having a mission in life. I anticipated higher scores in this area based on the cheerleaders' responses which seemed to indicate a strong sense of direction and purpose. Corky received the highest scores on Choice/Responsibleness and Coherence. Coherence refers to having a sense of order and reason for existence, while the dimension of Choice/Responsibleness refers to the perception of having personal control in one's life. Corky and Esther scored higher than the others on Death Acceptance. The higher scores may be related to their strong spiritual beliefs. The low scores across the board on Existential Vacuum were not surprising. According to their conversations, the cheerleaders described their lives as "busy," "active," "happy," "wonderful," and "full." Rose's higher score may be related to her strong desire to do more than what she is already doing. Rose and Catherine scored higher than the others on Goal Setting. The dimension of Goal Setting refers to searching for new and different experiences and challenges. Rose and Catherine both disclosed that they welcomed new opportunities and are open to different types of experiences. Catherine was not willing to give up or cut back on her other activities to focus primarily on cheerleading. She needed the sense of freedom and adventure that travel provided her.

The quantitative data from The Perceived Well-Being Scale-Revised (Reker, 1995) seemed to be more in line with the qualitative findings. The PWB-R is a measure of subjective physical and psychological well-being. Physical well-being is associated

with physical health and vitality and the absence of physical discomforts. Psychological well-being measures the presence of positive emotions and the absence of negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, and depression. The general well-being scale is a combined measure of physical and psychological well-being. The scores range from 8 to 56 on physical and psychological well-being and from 16 to 112 on general well-being. Little information was available on the norming methods for the PWB-R other than the normative sample was comprised of 703 adults, ranging in ages from 18 to 98 years old. The original PWB was normed on samples from the institutionalized and community populations of older adults.

The cheerleaders' scores on the PWB-R ranged from 34 to 56 on physical well-being and from 48 to 51 on psychological well-being. The general well-being scores ranged from 83 to 112. The PWB-R scores for Dolli, Catherine, Corky, Esther, and Rose are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Perceived Well-Being Scale-Revised Scores

Cheerleader	Physical Well-Being	Psychological Well-Being	General Well-Being
Dolli	42	54	96
Catherine	34	55	89
Corky	56	56	112
Esther	35	48	83
Rose	48	51	99

Note: Possible scores range from -8 to 56.

The bulk of the scores on the PWB-R were in the higher range, indicating that the cheerleaders perceive themselves to be physically and psychologically healthy. The scores on physical well-being ranged from 34 to 56 out of a possible range of scores from

-8 to 56. Catherine and Esther had lower scores, indicating that they perceived more physical difficulties than the others. Given Esther's back pain and Catherine's problems with her feet, the lower scores seemed reasonable. Corky scored a perfect 56 on both the physical and psychological components, indicating that she perceives herself as being highly healthy and well, despite her recent back surgery. The perfect score is characteristic of Corky's optimistic outlook on life in general.

#### Research Participant Perspective

I was pleased to have the opportunity to practice and perform with the Wilmington Golden Pom-Pom Cheerleaders while conducting the present study. I was asked to be at the top of the pyramid. The pyramid is built by standing on the thighs of two of the other cheerleaders and holding your body erect with arms outstretched overhead, followed by placing your hands on the shoulders of the cheerleader in front of you to form a moving pyramid. As the cheer indicates motion, the cheerleaders move as a whole unit.

I was nervous when I first assumed the pyramid position. I was afraid that I would hurt Catherine and Corky who formed the base of the pyramid. They assured me that I would not. At one point I did hurt them and replaced my heavy Sketcher athletic shoes with a more light weight version. I had to learn to accept the assistance of Catherine and Corky when dismounting and not try to do it all by myself. Dropping the pom-poms and climbing up at the precise moment took a little work. We got it, though. Catherine and

Corky commented that, “You do that with ease.” They followed up that remark with, “You are much lighter than the last one that did this.” The cheerleaders welcomed me on their team and seemed glad I was there. During our second interview session, Corky and I were discussing any particular goals that she, as captain, had for the group. She replied, “I’m just so happy that we have you and have someone little to get up on top: That was our goal right there.”

Just when we had perfected the pyramid part of the competition routine, we learned that I was not going to be able to perform in Raleigh as part of the squad. That news was a shock. This was the first time in a long time that I have ever been too young for anything. I remember the day that Martha gave me the news. She walked in the practice room with something in her hands that looked like a pizza box. One of the cheerleaders, I’m not sure which one exclaimed, “She has your uniform!” Excitement turned to disappointment as Martha’s next words to me were, “You’re not going to be able to compete with us in Raleigh; I don’t want to run the risk of us getting disqualified. You can perform at the other events, just not at the State.”

Martha said the words very matter-of-factly and then began to launch into the plans for the altered routine. Martha brought a diagram to share. She showed how Esther would take my place in the pyramid formation. She would stand on a stool to simulate standing on Catherine and Corky. Esther would now place her hands on Dolli’s shoulders and move to the cheer as I had done before. As the plans were unveiled and discussed, Catherine spoke up, “It’s just that our routine was so good. Linda was so light and could

get up easily.” Martha responded:

I know, but you all know the routine. You can do this. The modifications won't be that different. Or you can just not compete this year. It's up to you. If we compete we have to do the altered version. It's your choice.

The room was strangely silent. I felt badly for the ladies because they had worked so hard and knew that it would be difficult to change plans in mid-stream. Competition was just a few weeks away. Esther's back had been bothering her so it may be uncomfortable for her to climb, even on the stool. These ladies had their hearts set on competing. It was not so much about the chance to win a medal but more about the spirit of winning. The competition was the culmination of months of hard work: It was the ultimate showcase for the cheerleaders. Not going to competition would be like going through labor pains and not giving birth.

I couldn't let this happen to the cheerleaders. I sensed their reluctance to go forward without me being a part of the routine, partly because of their loyalty to a teammate and partly because they were uncomfortable with the unexpected change. I had to speak up. I said to Martha, “They are going to Raleigh. These ladies are going. They have worked too hard not to go.” The silence continued for a few minutes. Martha looked at the group and then directed her statement to Corky, “We're going to do the modified version.” Corky responded softly, almost reluctantly, “Yes.” Some discussion ensued about the logistics of the change.

Rose: Is there any particular reason you switched Esther as opposed to any one else? I don't care. I was just wondering.

Martha: I thought it would be easier that way.

Catherine: It's okay with us, but what about Esther? Her back has been bothering her.

Martha: We'll tell her at practice tomorrow. Remember, we have practice from 3:45 to 4:00.

When Esther learned of her new role, she handled it like a pro. She was true to her words that when she is a part of something she does everything to "make it work..." The team pulled together so beautifully for the competition. They were able to make the adjustments in their physical positioning as well as in their mental and emotional attitudes about the change. I was never more proud of them.

Competition was held on Friday, October 3, at the McKimmon Center on the campus of North Carolina State University. I drove up that day to support the squad. I had told them from the beginning that I would be with them whether performing or rooting them on in the stands. Corky and Esther were accompanied by their husbands and Rose drove up with a friend. Corky and Dolli had arrived earlier in the week as they were competing in several of the athletic events during Senior Games.

I supported the team that day by helping them get ready, by running errands, getting them water, and anything else I could do to help put them at ease and prepare them for victory. Martha, Rose's friend, the spouses, and I watched as the cheerleaders practiced outside in a grassy area. Their practice performance was a little shaky due to the unfamiliar surroundings. A few minor irritations occurred before the competition began, such as Dolli losing an earring and getting a make-up smudge on her turtleneck, but the show went on as planned.

At 2:00 PM the hostess announced the beginning of the cheerleading competition. I had been asked to handle the music portion of the routine by ensuring that the tape would be started at just the right time. I sat beside the sound system technician to coordinate the starting of the tape. I had more of a side view of our group on stage and my attention was somewhat diverted to the cueing of the music. The competition was held in an auditorium type atmosphere. The spectators set in rows of chairs facing the stage, where each cheerleading squad performed for the judges and the crowd. As the team moved on stage, I told the technician, "The music is needed when the cheerleaders move behind the chairs." Part of the routine involved Dolli, Corky, and Catherine, performing a clapping routine while seated in chairs with Rose and Esther standing behind them, executing different types of movements. As soon as the music began, the routine called for the cheerleaders to go into their high energy dance moves. The music portion was choreographed to *God Bless the USA*. The cheerleaders wore white sailor hats, playing off the patriotic theme.

I was so proud of the cheerleaders. They performed so much better than during practice. The adrenalin and enthusiasm of the crowd was pumping them up. They kept their smiles throughout the performance. Every part of the routine was on cue. Rose got the stool in position and supported Esther as she climbed on the stool and then onto the thighs of Corky and Catherine. She did not hesitate at all when she ascended the pyramid. She shot straight up right on cue. Corky and Catherine worked in sync, supporting her the whole time. The crowd shouted and clapped. At the end of the routine, the senior cheerleaders tipped their hats and exclaimed, "I'm outta here." Again, every move was

precise and on cue. Martha beamed. As the other squads performed, I leaned over and whispered to Rose's friend, "This will be close. The competition is tough."

After the last performance, all the teams were called back on stage to wait for the announcement of the winners. In about 5 minutes, the judges were ready with their decision. The 3<sup>rd</sup> place and 2<sup>nd</sup> place winners were announced. Then the big moment and the announcement we were all waiting and hoping to hear, "And 1<sup>st</sup> place goes to the Wilmington Golden Pom-Pom Cheerleaders." Our cheerleaders started jumping up and down and hugging one another. They received their medals and turned toward the audience and smiled. We all were very proud of them. I hugged Martha and Rose's friend and then the cheerleaders as they came down from the stage. The news reporter from WRAL in Raleigh did an interview with the gold medal winners. He had them do a brief cheer for the 5 o'clock news. As we were leaving the auditorium, I asked Martha, "What do you think made our team win?" She replied, "The judges had a lot of cheering experience; they were looking for cheerleading. The other groups had a lot of dance moves: Ours was more cheering."

The new 1<sup>st</sup> place cheerleading squad was exuberant. This was Rose's first competition and she was especially elated. Esther and husband Dan and Rose and her friend headed back to Wilmington after the competition. Corky and Dolli were staying for the Silver Arts Festival, showcasing the visual and heritage arts. Martha was staying for some of the other athletic events. Catherine was headed out to Greensboro to make a delivery of dishes. She had brought them with her, making the trip to Raleigh one of

business as well as pleasure. As we were saying our good-byes, the cheerleaders thanked me for being there. I replied wholeheartedly, “I wouldn’t have missed it.” I’m probably one of their biggest fans.

## Chapter 5

**DISCUSSION**Summary

The focus of the present study was to learn more about the aging experience from the senior athlete's perspective. A senior cheerleading squad was selected as the unit of study. By examining the lives of the squad members, I hoped to learn more about how the aging process is experienced by the senior athletes and the role that athletics play in later life. I was particularly interested in learning about the personal meaning systems of the cheerleaders in terms of their perceptions of aging and how athletic activity fits with those perceptions. I selected cheerleading as the focus of study because cheerleading is an activity that is not typically associated with older adults. I also had a special intrinsic interest in the senior cheerleaders, having admired their performances for some years at the Azalea Festival and other events around the Wilmington area.

A qualitative design was chosen for the study of senior cheerleaders. I selected Seidman's model as a guide for conducting the phenomenological interviews with the five senior cheerleaders. I was interested in hearing the cheerleaders' stories of how they became involved in cheerleading and what events and activities in their past led them to their present level of involvement with this activity. Because telling stories is a meaning-making process (Seidman, 1991, p. 1), I was interested in learning about the meanings behind the stories, in terms of the cheerleaders' perceptions of themselves and other seniors, and of the activities in which they were engaged. I wanted to understand the experience of cheerleading and how athletic activity interplayed with the aging process.

Interviewing the five senior women provided a way for me to access the context of the experience of cheerleading and to begin to understand the meaning behind the experience (Seidman, 1991). According to Seidman, “a basic assumption in in-depth interviewing research is that the meaning people make of their experience affects the way they carry out the experience” (Seidman, 1991, p. 4). Using an in-depth approach in interviewing the senior women allowed me to put the activity of cheerleading in context and provided access to understanding the personal meaning that the activity held for them, as well as their interpretations of the aging process as it relates to athletic involvement.

The following research questions guided the focus of the present study:

1. What are the personal constructs or personal meaning systems of senior athletes regarding aging?
2. What role do athletic activities play in finding meaning and fulfillment in older adulthood?
3. How are biological changes negotiated by the older athlete?
4. How are stereotypical attitudes regarding athletics and aging perceived by the senior athlete?
5. What pathways led to the present level of athletic involvement?
6. What are the future goals and aspirations of the senior athlete?
7. How do senior athletes rate their overall satisfaction with life?

The five senior cheerleaders were interviewed over a four month period. The interviews were spread out over a longer period of time than the time frame recommended by Seidman. This was due to the travel schedules of the cheerleaders, particularly in the cases of Corky and Catherine, who traveled extensively during the summer months. Arranging the three interview sessions with all five of the cheerleaders was challenging. The interviews were primarily scheduled on Tuesdays and Thursdays of each week, as these were the regular practice days. Occasionally, the practice schedules were altered to accommodate doctor's appointments, funerals, performances, or participation in other athletic events. I supplemented the interview data with observation data and conducted document analysis on the squad's historical documents and performance videos. Catherine provided a family video that described childhood experiences with her siblings, her parents, and her grandparents.

The data were analyzed inductively and the findings were constructed from the thematic connections and patterns found within each individual case and across cases. Each cheerleader was treated as an individual case study while the cheerleading squad itself was also seen as a unit of study. According to Stake (1995), "the case is a specific, a complex, a functioning thing" (p. 2). Each cheerleader was a vital entity that contributed to the complexity and functioning of the squad. I was interested in learning about the perceptions of cheerleading from an individual, as well as from a collective perspective. I wanted to understand cheerleading in terms of its personal meaning for each cheerleader and how the squad itself was interpreted by its members, its leaders, and by the general public. By exploring the role of cheerleading in later life, I hoped to learn more about

how the aging experience is interpreted through the lenses of the senior athletes. The phenomenon under examination was the personal meaning systems of senior women adult cheerleaders as they relate to athletic involvement and aging. The findings related to the initial research questions will be discussed in this chapter.

### Themes Related to Personal Meaning Systems

Participant-specific and common themes related to the personal meaning systems were found within and across the five individual cases. The participant-specific themes included fun, play, faith, personal responsibility, advocacy, busyness, hard work, humility, self reliance, family, travel, sports, tragedy, acceptance, recognition, team work, community and business affairs, activity, and learning. The themes were directly related to the way the cheerleaders had experienced their lives and the lives of others around them. The themes were an outgrowth of their personal meaning systems or personal constructs (Kelly, 1963) in terms of what they had been taught and exposed to as children and what they had learned through personal experience.

The common themes were activity, advocacy, commitment, convictions, family, fun, and tragedy or adversity. Perseverance was included as a sub theme associated with commitment as well as with tragedy. The common themes were related to the commonalities found among the personal meaning systems of the five senior women. The cheerleaders shared a common thread of activity in their lives from early childhood on into senior adulthood. Their lives were built around activity, so their affiliation with activity as part of a normal and healthy lifestyle continued throughout their adult lives. Their families had exposed them to various types of activities as they were growing up.

Dolli learned to dance and play cards at an early age and continued to incorporate those activities into her senior years. Rose also grew up with music and loved to sing and play musical instruments as a child. These activities were important to her as a senior adult, as well. Catherine experienced travel and adventure as part of her background. That spirit of adventure carried over into adulthood and has been a driving force in Catherine's senior years, so much so that her love of travel and adventure rivals her love of cheerleading.

Esther was exposed to civic and community activities through her parents' involvement with fraternal and professional organizations. Her early experiences with civic affairs influenced Esther's later involvement in politics and in holding positions of leadership in various organizations. Esther's participation in activities which required a great deal of planning and coordinating led Esther to seek cheerleading as a source of respite from organizational overload. Sports were the leading activities in Corky's life from childhood on into senior adulthood. Corky's mother was directly responsible for her daughter's love of sports. When Corky was a child, her mother introduced her to softball by having her hit a ball with a stick in the back yard. Corky has participated in numerous athletic events and has held a national title in table tennis for several years.

The cheerleaders' early exposure to a parental mindset that embraced and encouraged activity and involvement set the stage for the women's continued participation in athletics, as well as other activities, in their senior years. The earlier experiences of the cheerleaders created a common mindset about activity. Each of the cheerleaders believed that staying active and involved was the key ingredient for aging successfully.

They saw inactivity and lack of involvement as being detrimental to a healthy lifestyle. Their cheers addressed the issue of inactivity, as they encouraged other seniors to “stand up; get on your feet and move to that senior beat.”

Advocacy was a second common theme directly related to their personal meaning systems. As seniors themselves, the cheerleaders saw themselves as senior advocates. They advocated for healthy lifestyles for older adults. They encouraged their senior peers to get active and to get involved in activities that they could enjoy. As Catherine pointed out, “It doesn’t have to be cheerleading.” The cheerleaders all agreed that the senior center provided many opportunities for involvement and there was no excuse for individuals not to find something that they enjoyed doing. The cheerleaders advocated for youthful thinking in terms of activity and involvement. They applauded those seniors who were actively engaged in the process of living and enjoying their lives, despite age or health issues. They advocated for and valued the worth of every human being, regardless of age or status in life. The senior women advocated having a can-do attitude. As Rose proclaimed, “You can do anything you set your mind to.” She and the others were living proof of that philosophy. The cheerleaders spoke a message of hope and encouragement for their youthful audiences, as well as their peers, in terms of remaining active throughout their lives. By showcasing their strengths and abilities, the cheerleaders were prime examples of what seniors could do if they continued to stay fit and to challenge themselves physically and mentally.

The senior women advocated for continuous learning and personal growth throughout life. Catherine stressed to other seniors that they “shouldn’t ever, ever stop

learning.” She shared a personal affirmation that the “older she gets the more [she] realizes how much more there is to learn.” The cheerleaders have become the vocal instruments of the senior community, showcasing senior potential and leading the way to a healthier approach to life at all ages and stages of development.

The cheerleaders shared a keen sense of commitment. Whatever the activity entailed, the women were committed to seeing it through and giving it their best. Although Catherine indicated that cheerleading is not a priority at this point in her life, and that she “could care less” about winning medals, she continued to be committed to giving her best to the squad: “I don’t think that [my feelings about winning] keep me from trying to do my best and practicing hard.” As the newest member of the squad, Rose was committed to practicing and performing: “I just get out and do my best.” The cheerleaders showed commitment in other areas of their lives, as well, including family, faith, and various life passions.

Tragedy or adversity was common to all five cheerleaders. Dolli, Rose, and Catherine experienced the break up of their marriages due to violations of commitment and trust on the part of their spouses. Rose experienced ridicule because of her height. Esther’s husband died suddenly at 40 years of age. While Corky’s marriage remained intact, she suffered two devastating tragedies. Her grandson was killed, and her son was paralyzed in a diving accident. Despite adversity, the cheerleaders maintained an optimistic outlook on life and were able to see the positive in the situations they encountered. Corky became a kinder person as a result of the death of her grandson. Each of the situations made the women stronger and more confident in their abilities to weather

the storms of life. Corky, Esther, and Dolli shared a common faith in Christianity. They believed that, ultimately, every situation was in God's hands and in His purpose. While Catherine and Rose did not openly proclaim their faith, they made references to God's ultimate control in their lives.

Family was a unifying theme for all the cheerleaders. Family ties were very important to them. Each cheerleader described both her family of origin and her immediate family as being very close. The cheerleaders had similar backgrounds and upbringing. Dolli was the youngest of four children, while Catherine was the youngest of five. Catherine was the second oldest in a family of four children. Esther and Corky were both adopted and were the only children in their families. Each of the women described their parents as supportive and nurturing. They felt loved and accepted by the people who cared for them. Family continued to be important to them, as their children became adults and had children of their own. They had close relationships with their children and grandchildren. They spent time together and shared similar interests.

Fun was also a common theme. The cheerleaders shared a common view that activities need to be fun in order to keep people engaged. The cheerleaders described cheerleading as being fun and enjoyable and they were committed to keeping it fun. Each cheerleader approached cheerleading and life with a sense of wonderment and an expectation of fun. Catherine summarized this viewpoint well: "I've put in lots of years working, lots that were not such fun....At this point in my life, I want it to be fun."

The cheerleaders shared similar viewpoints in many respects due to the similarities in their upbringing and experiences, a common faith, and similar personal

convictions: They share a lived history. They grew up in a time period when women had fewer opportunities than in today's culture. In a sense, the cheerleaders have been liberated from the restrictions of the past and have more opportunities and activities from which to pick and choose. The five women grew up with a strong work ethic instilled in them by their parents. They were raised in a supportive family environment. That strong sense of commitment to family carried over to their own families. Personal responsibility was a shared belief among the cheerleaders. Hard work, dedication, and responsibility are key ingredients in team work. Because of their strong work ethic, the cheerleaders were committed to giving their best to cheerleading or to whatever they do. Their sense of liberation from the past seemed to motivate them to have fun.

#### Personal Constructs Regarding Aging

The five senior women shared similar perspectives on aging. This perspective was reflected in their responses to the *Senior Spirit* cheer during the group interview. Just as they are committed in other areas of their lives, they are committed to healthy aging and to enjoying every aspect of their lives, regardless of their ages. In fact, the senior women are proud of their ages. They are grateful for the number of years they have lived. They are grateful for the experiences they have had during their lifetime and some are anticipating greater experiences in the future.

They shared a similar view that the primary tenet of good health at every stage of life is staying active and involved. Dolli believed that "if you get up and go, you'll just feel better." Catherine had a strong motivation to stay active and involved. She experienced her mother's declining health and literally watched her mother waste away.

She vowed that that would not happen to her. She was committed to taking preventive action through activity and involvement. Esther stressed that it is important for seniors and younger people to “keep active and take care of your body.” Rose said that the worst thing anyone can do is “to sit down.” She encouraged other seniors to “be involved with something besides sitting in front of the television and dying.”

The cheerleaders also collectively believed that age should not be an obstacle in accomplishing personal goals. If an individual has a desire to do something, then he or she should do it, regardless of age. Rose offered these sentiments: “...Going up in age doesn’t mean you can’t do something. You can do it.” She reiterated, “Age is mind over matter; if you don’t mind, it doesn’t matter.”

Respect is a shared perspective regarding seniors as well as with all age groups. Dolli associated wisdom with being a senior. She said that she “hopes we know more than we did back when.” She felt that being a senior should be seen as a positive experience, a blessing to have lived to be called a senior. Corky had similar thoughts: “I’m proud of these years that the Lord let me live.”

The senior cheerleaders viewed older adulthood as a time for growth and learning. They shared a common belief that “you’re never too old to learn” and that learning is a life long process. Catherine felt that it is important for seniors to be involved in activities that challenge them mentally, like doing crossword puzzles or learning cheer routines.

Another shared perspective on aging is that older adulthood is a time for second chances. Dolli reminded other seniors that “if you didn’t get it the first time, do it now.” She wanted to be a cheerleader in high school but couldn’t because she had no

transportation home except the buses and she also had home commitments. Now Dollie was getting her chance to cheer. Martha, the coordinator of the group, shared that some of the women who became senior cheerleaders told her that they wanted to be cheerleaders in high school but, because they thought they “had big thighs,” they didn’t try out. She maintains an open door policy and that “there’s a place for everyone” on the squad. This is their second chance to do something in a supportive, fun, environment.

Being a senior involves rearranging priorities and making accommodations and adjustments to meet desired or revamped goals. As we get older, our priorities frequently change. For example, Corky shared some feelings of regret that she didn’t have the opportunity to go to college: “I would love to have been a gym teacher...I would give anything if I could turn the clock back and go to college.” When she was reminded that she could still go to college, she replied, “Well, I just don’t have the desire I did then.” Although Corky did not go to college, she viewed her life as very rewarding: “[I’m] having a good time and enjoying every minute.” Corky had channeled her energies into various other pursuits which were equally satisfying and educational.

A collective example of making accommodations and adjusting to change was the squad’s response to the altered version of their competition routine. When I could not perform with them as originally planned, the cheerleaders regrouped and repositioned themselves physically and mentally within the group formation. A stool was provided to accommodate Esther’s back discomforts; the group became even more attentive to her needs and was able to support her physically and emotionally to accomplish their goal of winning the gold. To me, this act of sacrifice and courage was more indicative of a

victorious spirit than had they accomplished the feat effortlessly. The senior cheerleaders were true champions as they overcame obstacles in their path to victory.

Martha's perspective on aging changed as she began working with seniors in her position as Program Coordinator for Senior Activities. Prior to her employment with the City, she perceived that her job would entail assisting seniors with daily care and transporting them. She was very surprised to find that the seniors she encountered were quite "functional." They drove here and there and were engaged in various activities. They were on the move. Natalie and Martha were much younger than the cheerleaders but were often more aware of senior abilities than the seniors themselves. Both coordinators strived to showcase the talents and abilities of the cheerleaders and the hundreds of other seniors with whom they worked. Martha became a firm believer in the senior athletes' motto: "Age ain't nuttin' but a number."

#### Significance of Cheerleading in the Lives of Senior Women

Cheerleading provided meaning and purpose in the lives of the senior cheerleaders in different and in similar ways. Prior to their state competition, the cheerleading coordinator asked each cheerleader to reflect on her inner purpose for being a cheerleader. She invited the women to look deep within themselves and to be honest about why they were involved in cheerleading. Martha did not expect or want an immediate response to the question. She wanted the cheerleaders to take some time to really think about why they were cheerleaders. Her goal in asking the women to consider the reason for their involvement was to motivate and challenge them to excel at competition. They needed to reach down and draw from their inner pools of strength and

purpose. I followed up on Martha's lead and asked each cheerleader the same question during the third interview session. This seemed an appropriate time for the question, as the focus of the last session was reflections.

Esther's reason for becoming a senior cheerleader was two fold. Esther was a natural joiner. She was accustomed to getting involved in things from childhood on. When Corky asked her to join, she thought "this might be fun." She found out that it was fun. Esther had been a cheerleader in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade so she knew some of the benefits of cheerleading. After joining, Esther learned that cheerleading also provided her a source of solace. She did not have to be responsible for planning and organizing. She could just relax and have fun. Cheerleading was "something different" for Esther. She really had to concentrate to do the cheers" and "just think of cheerleading." For the 2 hours of practice, cheerleading offered her a reprieve from her regimen of planning and organizing. Cheerleading was an activity that gave Esther "time for [herself]." She said that she first joined cheerleading "just for fun." As she became more involved and "got into the other side of it," Esther found that cheerleading was even more rewarding because of the enjoyment she was bringing to other people.

Catherine was a high school cheerleader. She was not particularly looking to be a senior cheerleader and got into cheering on the senior level "quite by accident."

Catherine's goal in visiting the senior center was to "get involved" in the activities there and "to stay active." She was unaware that there was "a group called senior cheerleaders." She was asking for general information at the front desk of the senior center when one of the cheerleaders came by. Catherine remarked that she used to be a

cheerleader in high school. That's all it took. Catherine was grabbed by the arm and whisked away to practice. The very next week Catherine was back at practice. She found out that [senior] "cheerleading is something I just enjoy immensely and it's fun." Since joining the squad, Catherine has taken on a few more activities. She even found a job, again, "quite by accident." The income from her "dishing" business opened up additional traveling opportunities for Catherine but less time for cheerleading. Catherine admitted that "[cheerleading] is not the first thing in [her] life" because of her other activities. She was somewhat torn between wanting to stay but feeling guilty about not being there for the squad: "I honestly feel guilty when I can't make every practice....yet at the same time, I don't want to give it up." To Catherine, cheerleading "is a whole bunch of things." It provides physical exercise, mental challenge, and a social outlet. It fits well with Catherine's fitness paradigm of "staying active and being involved."

Dolli's past history with dancing was a natural evolution into cheerleading. Dolli had been participating in dance and athletic activities at the senior center when Natalie approached her about cheerleading. Always ready for fun and activity, Dolli had no qualms about joining the squad. Dolli found that she "thoroughly enjoyed" cheerleading. It kept her busy. It gave her even more to do than she was already doing. Dolli liked to be busy. Busyness had been her salvation during the traumatic break up of her 22 year old marriage. Dolli realized the link between activity and well-being: "If I stayed home and didn't have anything to do, chances are I wouldn't feel that good."

Rose was invited to join cheerleading by Corky. She met Corky through a mutual participation in bowling. Rose was nervous at first about her ability to do the steps and

thought that she “would be a real clumsy ox.” With much encouragement from the other cheerleaders, she did learn the cheers and began to feel more confident about her cheerleading abilities. Rose felt that cheerleading helped her “with a lot of things.” It gave her “energy;” she felt acceptance by her peers; and it gave “her something to do and something to look forward to.” Cheerleading, for Rose, was a natural outgrowth of her love of performing. She found a way to channel the desire to perform and to gain recognition in a positive way. Cheerleading has given Rose the self confidence to try new activities, as well. However, cheerleading remains number one in Rose’s life right now.

Corky was born to cheer! Active and energetic all her life, Corky naturally oozed enthusiasm. Cheerleading was an excellent vehicle for projecting her energy and enthusiasm onto the crowds who were astonished at Corky’s acrobatic skills. Corky was athletic from childhood. Her athletic talents and exuberance for life were appropriately funneled into cheerleading. Corky loves everything about cheering—the fun, the excitement, the challenge of learning the routines, the competition, and the camaraderie of the group. Corky has been committed to cheerleading for 15 years.

### Negotiating Aging

The cheerleaders did not reveal many difficulties associated with aging; perhaps they have not experienced that many because of their active and fitness oriented lifestyle, or perhaps they have not perceived as many. Corky had back surgery in the spring of 2003. She missed several weeks of practice. When she came back, she came back in full force. She was careful about lifting things for a while, so she could not support the weight of the pyramid for a few weeks. When discussing her surgery and her recuperation

period, Corky did not mention the physical pain and discomfort so much, but talked more about the depression and boredom she felt due to her inactivity. She said that she knew how her son felt after being paralyzed and that there was no reason to get up in the morning: “There was nowhere to go and nothing to do.” Having no sense of purpose or meaning can be debilitating. Frankl described the condition as “existential frustration” (Frankl, 1984, p. 123). The emotional and psychological pain was much worse for Corky than the physical pain.

In a few weeks following her surgery, Corky was back to doing cartwheels again. Nothing could keep her down. She wouldn't let it. Corky is not a complainer: If she had aches and pains, no one would know it. Corky negotiates aging by continuously staying active; by having an optimistic outlook; by doing things that she enjoys like traveling; and by having fun. Corky also has a wonderful sense of humor and laughs often. She has the ability to laugh at herself, as well as situations. She said that she and the other cheerleaders are “not typical 70ish” seniors. Her idea of a typical senior used to be a “lady with white hair and gloves sitting in a rocking chair.” Corky rarely sits and certainly not in a rocking chair. She is in perpetual motion, playing and having fun. Corky has an “ageless” quality about her. Her enthusiasm, zest for life, high energy, and upbeat spirit are attributes generally associated with youth.

Esther also has problems with her back, not that back pain is necessarily associated with aging, but wear and tear on the back can cause problems at any age. Esther manages her back discomfort by exercising. One of her doctors has recommended that she give up cheerleading; however, the doctor she sees for pain is adamant that she

should continue cheering. He believes that the activity is good for her. Esther agrees. She firmly believes in staying active and being involved in meaningful activities that are also fun. Esther equates an aging mindset with inactivity and lack of involvement. She said that some 40 year olds could be considered seniors because of their lackadaisical and inflexible attitudes.

Although Esther has been in considerable pain with her back, she rarely mentioned the discomfort. She has made adjustments to accommodate her physical needs. She used a stool to climb up on the pyramid. She uses knee pads when in a kneeling position. She and her husband have begun to downsize some of their activities and affiliations in order to have more time for family and other things of interest. They have a 5 year plan which consists of scaling back. Esther has started delegating leadership tasks to others. She and husband Dan have begun the process of reordering their priorities.

Catherine has had some problems with her feet. At times, it is uncomfortable for her to walk. Her discomfort has never slowed her down, however. Catherine has vowed that she would not go down the path that her mother did. Her mother spent the last 5 years of her life in bed. According to Catherine, as she became less active and less involved, her “world got smaller and smaller.” Catherine adheres to a preventive maintenance plan that involves physical exercise, social contact, continuous learning, and fun.

Dolli negotiates aging by staying busy and remaining independent and self sufficient. She is busy “about every minute of the day.” Dolli values her independence

and is committed to protecting that independence as long as she can. When the grocery store clerks tried to divide her groceries into smaller, more manageable parcels, Dolli said, “Load those bags up; I can carry them.” When other seniors complain about being fearful of living alone, Dolly’s advice to them is, “Get a dog.” That’s what she did. Dolli has always been resourceful. If she’s sees a problem or wants to do something, she gets busy and takes care of the problem or finds a way to meet her goals. When Dolli wanted to learn how to play tennis, she taught herself. Her resourcefulness and independent spirit are still with her in her senior years. She hopes that if she has to go into a nursing home that she will have a good attitude about it. She would make the transition from independent to assisted living by getting involved in the activities at the facility and by staying busy knitting and crocheting.

Rose dreads the thought of not being able to care for herself and going into a nursing home. She feels that people there are “lonely, old and just sitting and dying.” Rose feels that nursing home residents have been put away by their families only to be forgotten. Not being active and doing the things she likes to do would be devastating to Rose. Rose has to be moving. She negotiates aging by being active. She says that she is “going to keep on going and going and run into heaven.”

Corky, Esther, Catherine, Dolli, and Rose plan to remain active as long as physically possible. They associate activity with health and youthful thinking. They are involved in living. They have made an investment in healthy living, activity, and a social network of family and friends. They made the effort to “get busy,” to not “be lazy,”

to stay in the game of life and not quit. Not only do they not quit, but they encourage others to stay in the game, to remain active and involved, to put something in in order to get something back. They plan to play as hard as they can as often as they can and to have fun in the process. To these women athletes, “age ain’t nuttin’ but a number.” They’re proud of their years, proud of what they have done, what they can do, and what they will do in the future.

### Negotiating Ageist Attitudes

For the most part, the general public was very receptive to the cheerleaders and responded positively to them. The cheerleaders felt that their audiences, both older and younger, were “amazed” and “astonished” at what seniors could do. Rose described their reception at the opening of the women’s basketball game at UNC-W: “And everybody cheered when we got done because they see seniors; teenagers they love, but seniors, it’s something they think if they can do it, I can do it.” The cheerleaders felt that they were an inspiration to others. The senior squad was especially well received at the Azalea Festival celebration. Corky remarked on their reception there: “Everybody loves a cheerleader... [they] go crazy.” The senior cheerleaders are an example of universal stamina and perseverance. They represent the human spirit in terms of overcoming doubt, fear, and those people or things that try to keep individuals down. They see themselves as motivating other seniors and younger persons to be the best they can be at any age.

The negative responses to the senior cheerleaders have been few. When they performed for a college gerontology class, two young men in the class snickered and

made rude remarks. The instructor of the class dealt harshly with the students, and they were much kinder to the women following the episode. Through it all, the women just kept cheering. Corky described two additional incidents, one at the bowling alley and one at a nursing home. The negative comments the cheerleaders receive generally revolve around opinions such as “[they’re] old women trying to act young.” Corky responded to remarks such as this with these sentiments: “I don’t care if that’s the way they feel about it. They do what they want. They do their thing and I do my thing. It’s fun [and] we bring happiness to a lot of people. They don’t have to watch.” Sometimes Corky doesn’t want to go back to places where she encounters rude and negative people: “If that’s the way they feel, I just don’t want to go back. But they kept right on making comments and I did keep going back.” Such is the mark of a true athlete. They may fall down, or get knocked down, but they get up and keep moving toward the finish line.

#### Pathways to Athletic Involvement in Later Life

The cheerleaders followed similar pathways in reaching their present level of athletic activity. For the most part, their families were instrumental in introducing them to activity in general. Their parents pursued active lifestyles and passed this legacy on to their children. Dolli’s father taught his children to dance and have fun. After a hard day’s work, he would “roll up the carpet and dance” with Dolli and her siblings. Dolli started dancing as a toddler and has been dancing ever since. Like her father, Dolli learned to balance work with play. Cheerleading, dance, and other physical types of activity have become sources of relaxation and renewal for her. A strong sense of self-reliance instilled in her by her family led her to learn tennis and knitting on her own. That independent and

self-reliant spirit is so evident in Dolli today. Whether learning tennis, dining alone, or carrying her own groceries, Dolli has the confidence to just do it.

Rose's family was musically inclined. Rose grew up singing and dancing and learning to play musical instruments. Her parents would gather at the neighbors for a social time centered around music. Following the lead of her mother and sister, Rose taught herself to "chord on the piano." She also took accordion lessons as an adult, then, later, turned her interests to the organ. Her family, while not engaged in athletic pursuits, was very active musically. Rose's early experiences with music and singing naturally evolved into a passion for performing. Cheerleading has provided that channel for Rose's love of performing. Rose's high energy level propelled her into various athletic activities as a teenager and young adult. She played baseball and volleyball and loved to run. She was at the gym every chance she got doing something athletic. She was an active parent, playing ball and sledding with her children. She was involved in the lives of her children as her parents were with her. Her earlier passions for music and athletics have found their way into Rose's life as a senior adult. She has become involved in various senior center activities and wants to try more. As a child, Rose's mother advised her to "stand tall and walk tall." Cheerleading has continued that impetus. Through her participation in cheerleading, Rose has gained the confidence to reach out and embrace new challenges.

Esther's childhood was full of activity in terms of belonging to various groups and organizations. Esther was a lot like her father in terms of his political and civic interests and his ability to relate well to people. Esther joined numerous activities at

school and was very active in her church. Esther described her school years as “busy.” Esther continued her active lifestyle into adulthood. She used her organizational skills in her business ventures with her husband. She became more active in political and civic affairs after she retired and moved to North Carolina. Her interests in politics and community relations were grounded in her earlier childhood experiences and parental influences. A natural joiner, Esther got involved with cheerleading by invitation. She was a cheerleader in high school. Esther joined the squad and found cheerleading to be fun, relaxing, and rewarding. Generous by nature, the giving to others that Esther experienced through cheerleading, had a very natural appeal to her as well.

Corky’s pathway to cheerleading and other types of sports was relatively easy to trace. Corky was practically born with a ball in her hand. She became interested in playing softball at an early age. She was introduced to the sport by her mother who took her “out in the back yard and started throwing a ball to her and letting her hit the ball with a stick.” From that moment on, Corky was “wacko over anything with a ball.” Over the years, Corky has played volleyball, table tennis, badminton, basketball, and tennis, in addition to softball. Athletics were naturally appealing to Corky because of her high energy level and her early exposure to softball. Corky has continued her athletic pursuits as a senior. She picked up bowling and cheerleading along the way. Corky’s contagious enthusiasm, boundless energy, and optimistic personality made her a natural for cheerleading.

Catherine also had an active childhood. Her grandfather provided her with adventure after adventure, including gambling and riding in a car on the icy pond used

as a skating rink. Her grandparents instilled in her a love for adventure. Her parents instilled in her a passion for travel. Adventure and travel are words appropriately associated with Catherine. Her sense of adventure led her to North Carolina after retirement. She did not “know a soul” there but was committed to staying active and being involved with people and activities. She visited the senior center to check out the programs there, and serendipitously got involved with cheerleading through her conversation with a senior cheerleader on her way to practice. Catherine seemed to have an uncanny ability to be at the right place at the right time. Always open and ready for new challenges, Catherine decided to try cheerleading on the senior level. She joined the senior squad because it was fun, and it was an immediate way to make social contacts in a new city. Catherine’s sense of adventure, her confidence, and her enthusiasm were well suited to the activity of cheerleading.

#### Future Goals/Aspirations of Senior Cheerleaders

The aspirations of the cheerleaders were varied. Their personalities, backgrounds, and personal lifestyles tended to influence their future outlooks. Dolli was interested in maintaining her current activity level for as long as she could. She was happy with her busy, active lifestyle. She could not add one more activity to her already full plate. Her approach to life has been similar to her approach to shopping. She has loaded up on activities just as she wanted her grocery bags “loaded up.”

Esther and her husband have begun to cut back on some of their activities. Their plates had, in a sense, become too full. They were becoming more selective in their choice of activities, desiring to spend more time with grandchildren. They had a new

grandbaby and wanted to enjoy being grandparents of a newborn again. They wanted to do more traveling. Church activities were always a priority for Esther. Organizational activities were a big part of her life and would continue to be, just on a smaller scale. As long as cheerleading remained fun, Esther planned to remain a part of the squad. She has some musical aspirations such as getting involved with the city chorus and a barber shop quartet. Esther was in chorus and band while in high school. Esther appreciates the freedom, the flexibility, and the generally good health to be able to do the things she enjoys. Esther's immediate goals are to "continue the life style that [she enjoys]."

At this point in her life, Rose was ready to try a few new things. Cheerleading had given her self-confidence the boost she needed to entertain the possibility of new challenges. She wanted to join the Rocking Chair Players, a senior drama team. Acting and performing were certainly passions of hers. She wanted to look into taking a tap dance class. Acting and dancing were two immediate goals. Cheerleading remains Rose's first love and it has become a springboard into other activities and challenges. Personal growth is another area of focus for Rose. She has made great strides in self acceptance and continues to work on being able to laugh at herself.

Adventurous Catherine has exciting plans for the future. She wants to go for a hot air balloon ride and try parasailing. She would like to live in Europe for awhile, exploring and soaking up the culture and artistic heritage there. She intends to stay active, involved, and independent as long as physically possible. She is realistic; however, and understands that there will come a time when she will no longer be able to drive and she may have to have some assistance with personal care. She has begun preparing herself and her

children for that future time by openly discussing with them her financial issues and her desires for the future. She is making decisions at this point that will impact her later in life. She has taken the necessary steps to safeguard a healthy lifestyle for many years to come. She has been involved in physical activity on a regular basis, and seems to have learned the wisdom in seeking balance in work and play. Her immediate plans for the future include “enjoy[ing] the rest of [her] life.”

#### Perceptions of Life Satisfaction and Well-Being

The conversations with and observations of the cheerleaders indicated that the senior women were content with their lives at this particular stage of their development. Dolli stated that she “still tries to have those happy times” as she did as a child. She still “plays every day.” When thinking of the future, in terms of living in a nursing home, she remarked, “I hope I will make myself happy [there].” Dolli tended to adjust her perceptions of any situation to keep her outlook positive and optimistic. Dolli’s faith and resourcefulness have helped her maintain that positive outlook.

Corky described herself as “optimistic.” Whenever life gave her lemons, she automatically made lemonade. Corky even used the lemons of tragedy to help her grow personally. She has become more gentle and kinder, and her family has become closer as a result of the tragic events in her life. She also described herself as a “happy, happy person.” Corky attributed her optimistic outlook and her ability to see the best in people and situations to her faith. Her belief that God is ultimately in control and will work all things together for good has sustained her through the dark periods of life. Corky goes out of her way to look for people to encourage. Her life has been an example and a

Christian witness to many. She has been contented through the years with her “wonderful life,” a “wonderful husband,” and “wonderful children.” Corky counts the number of years that she has lived as a blessing from God.

Rose overcame past feelings of rejection and ridicule to become more accepting of herself and of others. She is less self-conscious and has traded in her former “I can’t do it attitude.” She now believes that she “can do anything she sets her mind to.” Never satisfied to just sit and vegetate in front of the television, Rose is ready to try different things. She now has the confidence to step out and try her wings in new areas of interest.

Esther described her senior years as a time of peace, joy, and contentment. She expressed her satisfaction with this time of her life: “I love being [Esther]. I’m very pleased with [Esther]. It’s a good time in life. I feel good about what I’ve accomplished. There’s a lot of things that I wish we could do but physically we’ve gotten to the age it isn’t possible....There’s still a lot of things we’re going to be doing.” Peaceful and content are appropriate descriptions of Esther. Although she doesn’t talk about her concerns with her back, she has had much discomfort. She has made the necessary adjustments to accommodate her physical needs and continues to make adjustments on an as-needed basis.

The qualitative data seemed to be a more accurate reflection of the cheerleaders’ life attitudes than the quantitative measures. According to the cheerleaders’ responses during the interview sessions, I expected much higher scores on the LAP-R. The scores of the senior women fell in the low moderate to high moderate ranges when compared to

a norming group of women between the ages of 41 and 89 years old. (See Table 1 on page 234 for the LAP-R scores.)

The PWB-R scores seemed to be consistent with the qualitative findings. (See Table 2 on page 236 for the PWB-R scores.) The bulk of the scores were in the higher range, indicating that the cheerleaders perceive themselves to be physically and psychologically healthy.

#### Present Findings and Previous Research

The findings were similar to those found in other studies of aging in terms of what constitutes successful aging. Aging well, or successful aging, has been associated with the following attributes: caring for and connectedness to others, humor, the capacity for play, flexibility, curiosity, positive emotions and attitudes, a strong social network, tolerance of self and others, and engaging in meaningful activities (Dittman-Kohli, 1990; Erikson, 1986; Reker, 1997; Reker, et. al, 1987; Snowden, 2001; Vaillant, 2002).

On some level, the five cheerleaders demonstrated all of the attributes listed above. They expressed caring for their families and friends, caring for one other, and caring for the audiences for whom they performed. Family was a definite priority with each of the cheerleaders. The cheerleaders demonstrated their care and support of one another, both physically and emotionally. Esther was physically supported by her team mates on the pyramid. She was emotionally supported by the squad's encouragement to do something that was challenging for her. Caring for squad members was evidenced by the placement of several thank-you notes in the scrapbook. The notes were from cheerleaders expressing their gratitude for their team mates' thoughtfulness during times

of illness and loss. The squad cares about the persons they cheer for, especially those in nursing homes. After they perform, the cheerleaders regularly stay and visit with the residents, patting their hands, giving them hugs, and offering words of encouragement. They love to make the residents' eyes light up and bring joy into their lives.

Fun and play were mentioned frequently throughout the narratives. The senior women liked to have fun and intended to have fun in their lives. Part of the appeal of cheerleading was the fun associated with it. Fun was a second common theme among the cheerleaders.

The women certainly showed flexibility when the competition routine needed to be altered. They quickly helped each other learn the new positioning and moves and kept a positive attitude about making the changes. Once the decision was made to modify the routine, the cheerleaders rallied around the coordinator and each other to make it work. Their flexibility is also demonstrated in the way they approach different audiences. They tend to vary their routines to fit the audience. Their flexibility has been seen throughout their lives in their responses to significant others and events in their lives, and in the way they respond to situations not readily under their control.

Curiosity and motivation to learn new things has been evidenced in the cheerleaders' approach to learning new routines. At one point, when they didn't have a coordinator, they were stuck in a "stalemate" because they didn't have anyone to teach them new cheers. The squad thrives on learning and being challenged. The cheerleaders tend to be life long learners, learning new skills and in Catherine's case, new languages.

The cheerleaders radiate enthusiasm and positiveness. Such qualities go along with being a cheerleader. Corky described herself as “an optimist.” Dolli described herself as being “happy.” Catherine typically sees the good in every situation. Rose has a can-do attitude. Esther is full of joy and happiness. The cheerleaders are able to communicate a positive message of hope and encouragement to other seniors and to younger individuals because they fully believe in what they are cheering about. The scores on the PWB-R were reflective of their positive outlooks. Despite any physical problems, their scores reflected positive perceptions of health and general well-being.

Each of the cheerleaders has a strong social network of family and friends. They are active and involved in numerous activities that provide a sense of connectedness to others. Because of their faith, Dolli, Esther, and Corky have a strong bond with their church communities. They were supported through periods of adversity by their church families. Rose and Catherine have stayed in contact with friends in different places that they have lived. They have made new friends through the senior center and through the activities that they enjoy. Rose is on a bowling league and Catherine volunteers at the Humane Society.

Over the years they have become more accepting and less critical of themselves and others. Corky laughs about her “thunder thighs.” Catherine jokingly referred to “making a fool out of herself” as a prerequisite for cheerleading. Dolli has the ability to look at the lighter side of painful situations. Rose has become more self confident and self accepting due to the hospitality of her sister cheerleaders. Esther laughs at herself

if she makes a mistake during practice. She has the attitude, “It’s no biggie.” They have learned, for the most part, not to sweat the small stuff. Corky stresses that “we live in an imperfect world” while Rose affirms that “we all have our flaws.”

The findings of previous gerontology research related to the processes of assimilation, adaptation, accommodation, optimization, and compensation found in successful aging were supported by my study (Barak & Raltz, 1999; Coleman, et. al., 1999; Dittman-Kohli, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 1998; Melia, 1999; Thompson, 1992; Vaillant, 2002). The use of these adaptive life processes was certainly apparent in the lives of the senior women. Exploring the past and present life experiences of the cheerleaders was enlightening in terms of how they perceived themselves and the world around them and the strategies they used in relating to the external world over time. The tragedies that the five women experienced called for them to use adaptive measures in adjusting to life without the presence of those individuals in their lives whom they had learned to count on and rely upon. Dolli, Rose, and Catherine had to adapt to life as single women and parents after having been in a monogamous relationship for a long period of time. They drew on their resources of inner strength and abilities plus acquired new skills in the process of raising their children and functioning in the world without being in a marriage relationship. Faith, family, and activities helped them to adjust to a different lifestyle.

Adapting to the realization of being a senior required the use of adaptive processes such as optimization and compensation. The senior cheerleaders capitalized on their strengths and talents while down playing those weaker areas. The senior

cheerleading squad was in itself a grand example of these two adaptive processes. By showcasing the senior capabilities, the group sent a strong message to other seniors that growing older does not have to be a negative experience. By focusing on what they can do rather than what they cannot do, the senior cheerleaders are making an impact on the senior community and the community at large.

Esther was a prime example of compensation. When she could not climb atop the pyramid, she compensated by the use of a stool. She compensated for her knee discomfort while kneeling by using knee pads. The squad as a whole compensated for their perception of “aging arms” by wearing long sleeve turtlenecks under their cheerleading vests.

Rose used assimilative processes in boosting her self confidence and self esteem by selecting the more enhancing environment of cheerleading in which to meet her social needs. Cheerleading provided Rose with a supportive, accepting environment where she was not treated any differently or made to “stand out” because of her height. Catherine, Esther, and Corky used accommodative processes in terms of rearranging their priorities to accommodate the changes and current needs in their lives. Catherine finally had the income she needed to travel, an activity that she immensely enjoyed. She was challenged to move travel and family positions ahead of cheerleading in order to maintain harmony and balance in her life. Esther and her husband were getting somewhat overloaded with the demands of the organizations to which they belonged. They began to scale back their organizational activities in order to enjoy other things in life, such as grandparenting and travel. Corky’s life has been one of adjustment and transition in terms of her father’s

death, her grandson's death, and her son's paralysis. Corky's life has taken different turns than she expected. She wanted to go to college but didn't have the opportunity. Looking back with some regret, she realizes that her priorities are quite different now and she "doesn't have the desire [to go to college]" as she once did. Her priorities became reordered over the years. Regardless of the unexpected and adverse situations that she has encountered over the years, Corky reports that she "has had a wonderful life." Her ability to "make lemonade out of lemons" is an excellent example of assimilation, accommodation, optimization, and compensation.

The notion that one ages as they have lived (Melia, 1999; Snowden, 2001) was also supported by my study. Again, conducting the three-tiered phenomenological interview regiment allowed me to see the progression of events in the lives of the cheerleaders from their earliest childhood memories to the present time. The cheerleaders literally grew up and developed into their senior status in front of my eyes. I was able to follow the development of their personalities, their work and leisure activities, their passions, and the relationships that were important to them. I could relate to and understand their past, present, and future decisions and plans in terms of their personal meaning systems. I began to understand how each cheerleader's personal meaning system evolved from her upbringing and the influences of family and other significant relationships and life events. The seniors I saw before me were the same, in some respect, as the children that they described from the past. They were only a stronger, more resilient, and more durable version. The life threads that were observed were consistent. Their positioning in life in terms of relating to self and others had undergone constant

revision and continued to be revised, but the main core of their being was intact. For example, Dolli's predominant life themes were hard work, busy-ness, and personal responsibility. Those themes are still very observable in Dolli's life as a senior, in the way she approaches her commitment to her family, to cheerleading, and to her other obligations and activities in life. She believes that everyone should carry their weight and she doesn't have much patience for those who don't. Dolli has a practical, common sense approach to life. She also has a humorous, light side. She has learned to balance the two.

Corky's life themes have been fun, play, and optimism. Corky says herself that she was "spoiled rotten" as a child by her mother and then as an adult by her husband. She has had the freedom and the protection she needed to be able to have fun. Corky has a child-like innocence about her despite the adversities she has experienced. She has a child-like faith in her God. She is very trusting. Corky has been able to balance her sense of play with a sense of responsibility and dependability. She believes that "her word" needs "to be her bond." She lives by that principle.

Rose's life theme has been one of acceptance. Although she was loved and accepted by her family, she felt rejected and ridiculed by her peers because of her height. Over her life, Rose has encountered people and situations where she has found acceptance for awhile, only to lose it, and to regain it again. She has finally found places and people in her life that do accept her for who she is inside, not because of her outward appearance. Her adult children and her nieces and nephews support and accept her. She has felt total acceptance by her peers in cheerleading. Acceptance has been important to Rose and continues to be an important issue in her life. She is working toward even

greater self acceptance by being able to laugh at herself.

Catherine's life theme has been one of adventure. She developed her sense of adventure through her grandfather's antics as she was growing up. He instilled in her a love of life, exploring, and going and seeing new things. Catherine continues that theme into senior adulthood and is playing it out through travel and exploring new cultures and lands.

Esther's life theme seems to be personal relations. She is very personable. She grew up with a father that was also personable. She and her parents were involved in various people oriented activities. Esther has continued that involvement throughout her life and tends to love being surrounded by family and friends and to be in the midst of activity. Her community relations, her church work, her civic involvement, and her cheerleading activities have all fit into her life theme.

#### Fit of Theoretical Framework

The data have supported the conceptual framework used in the study. While there are other theories that can aid in understanding the aging experience, the works of Frankl, Kegan, and Kelly provided an appropriate fit for understanding the personal meaning systems of the senior adult cheerleaders and their perceptions of cheerleading and of aging. The women's responses related to finding purpose and meaning in cheerleading supported Frankl's notion of the will to meaning.

Frankl's second and third tenets were also supported. The second tenet deals with personal discovery of meaning. While the cheerleaders found meaning and purpose in cheering, the meanings and purposes were personal and unique for each of them. For

Esther, cheerleading was a respite from more demanding activities in terms of planning. For Rose, cheerleading gave her something to do, something to look forward to. For Dolli, cheerleading kept her busy. For Catherine, it was a way to stay active. For Corky, it was fun! The third tenet involves the freedom to choose how one responds to a situation. The cheerleaders all had tragedies in their lives. They were able to choose a position of learning from the tragedy. Catherine was able to find the positives in her marriage. Corky learned to be kinder to others as a result of her grandson's death. Dolli learned to forgive, let go, and move on. Rose and Esther learned self-reliance and perseverance.

Kegan's Theory of the Evolving Self (1982) described the relationship between an individual and the external world in terms of "meaning-making" (p. 11) or "knowing the world" (p. 28). The main premise of his model was that as individuals grow and develop, they basically outgrow their former way of relating to the external world. The old relationship, the old balance, doesn't work anymore. A new balance between the individual and the external environment has to be established in order for the individual to function effectively in his or her world.

As the cheerleaders moved through various stages of their lives, new ways of relating to self and others had to be established. The tragedies that the cheerleaders experienced in terms of broken relationships called for a new balance, a new way of knowing the world. Dolli's world was pretty shaken. She grew up in an environment of trust and protection. She was used to working hard and getting good results. After

investing 22 years in her marriage, her husband violated her trust. She was very vulnerable. She had made the investment in the relationship but got little in return. She had to reposition herself in terms of her expectations of others. She also learned that she was more than the relationship and that she could survive without it. She used her resourcefulness and her repertoire of activities to navigate effectively in the world without being in a marriage relationship.

Relating to the world as a senior required a repositioning of or a reinterpretation of self and others. Getting used to being a senior and to growing older calls for new interpretations of self and a new relationship or fit between self and the outside world. Corky said that she felt like a “teenager trapped in an old woman’s body.” To her, her youthful energy didn’t match her older body. She has had to reposition her thinking on what constitutes youthfulness and how she can incorporate the new reality into the former perceptions of her self. She has had to find a new fit or balance with the external environment and to establish a new way of knowing the world as a senior adult. She has learned to be comfortable with an older version of herself.

The squad itself also evolved over time. When the group began, there were fewer activities competing with the members’ commitment to cheerleading. As new members have come on board, the needs of the group have changed. Practice times and expectations may have to change in order for the group to continue to thrive. The squad incorporated a new coordinator and a new way of approaching cheerleading. A new balance had to be created between the leader and the group and between the squad and the community.

Kelly's Personal Construct Theory (1963) provided a suitable framework for understanding the attitudes and perceptions related to cheerleading and the senior experience. Many of the cheerleaders' personal constructs were quite similar. They tended to see the world in similar fashion. Family, a sense of dedication, a belief in personal responsibility, a strong commitment to stay active and involved, and perseverance were all constructs shared by the group. Their personal constructs influenced the way they approached each other, the way they approached cheerleading, and the way they approached the audiences for whom they performed. Their positive attitudes and optimistic outlooks on life were based on their personal meaning systems regarding life, athletic activities, and their perceptions of themselves and others. Their personal constructs regarding their health and well-being were reflected on the PWB-R. Their personal constructs regarding athletics and aging were reflected in the interview and observation data.

#### Contributions of the Study

The study supported the previous findings related to components of successful aging. The study also supported the notion that an individual ages in the same ways as he or she managed and related to life in younger stages of development. The study supported the role of athletics in finding meaning and purpose in life and has implications for advocating for and teaching younger individuals the benefits of athletic participation and leisure activities at an early age. As Dolli indicated, "Tennis is something you can always come back to." Learning more about successful aging is important not only for current seniors but for future generations of seniors as well. Engaging in healthy lifestyles

throughout the ages and stages of development is important for every individual.

Psychological health is often overlooked or down played in the senior adult. The study has contributed to the body of knowledge related to what constitutes psychological health and well-being in the older adult. The study supports athletic activity and involvement as contributing to life satisfaction and overall physical and psychological well-being in later life.

#### Future Research Implications

The study examined senior women only. Research with male athletes may produce different findings. Are the pathways to athletic involvement different for men than for women? What are the personal constructs of men regarding the purposes of athletics? Do older male athletes perceive the role of athletics differently than their younger counterparts? What are the personal constructs of men regarding aging? Are these different from women's perspectives? Learning more about the male perspective as well as the female's can facilitate the understanding of aging and how both genders might approach aging with different perspectives and needs. Understanding those differences can better prepare those professionals that work with seniors to be able to meet the needs of both male and female senior adults.

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## Appendices

**Appendix A**Cover Letter

May 6, 2003

Martha James  
PO Box 1810  
City of Wilmington  
Senior Programs  
Wilmington, NC 28402

Dear Mrs. James and the Golden Pom-Pom Cheerleaders:

Let me introduce myself. My name is Linda Longley. I live in Rocky Point, North Carolina. I am currently in my last year as a doctoral student at North Carolina State University. I am beginning my dissertation study at this point. I am a late bloomer, so I have adult children and grandchildren, so I probably have many things in common with many of you cheerleaders.

I have the utmost respect and admiration for you ladies. Your talent, energy, and enthusiasm is so inspiring. I have been a big fan of yours for years and love to see you perform. I would be most honored if you would consent to participate in my dissertation study on finding meaning and purpose in life through athletics.

I would like to learn more about what it is like to be a senior cheerleader and what it is like to be a contemporary senior in our culture today. I would like to interview you as a group and individually, if you would allow me this honor. You are all just truly fascinating and I am so excited about what you are doing and the positive publicity that you are gaining.

I look forward to meeting you and working with you. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Linda Longley  
107 Marlboro Farms Road  
Rocky Point, NC 28457  
910-675-2751 (home)  
910-675-2309, Ext. 222 (work)

**Appendix B**

North Carolina State University  
Dissertation Research

Consent to Participate

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the  
graduate research on seniors and athletics conducted by doctoral student, Linda Longley.

I understand that by agreeing to participate I am giving my consent to be interviewed, to  
have the interview audio-taped, and have portions of the interview shared with university  
faculty and published in the form of a dissertation for public viewing. No real names or  
identifying information will be shared.

Participant Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_