

# Day after day, retired professor walks for his life

The morning felt more like winter than spring. A wind stirred street sand into swirls across the parking lot of the Eastside Marketplace in Providence. A lone figure shuffled across the asphalt.

He was a slight, elderly man with white hair. He gripped a walking stick in his right hand. A few minutes before, he had left the EPOCH assisted living facility, which is next to the market. It was 8:45



By Mark Patinkin

a.m. and the temperature was in the 30s. He moved slowly, but with determination. The shuffle seemed to come both from age and a right foot that slightly dragged.

He gave his name as Frank Stewart. He talked in a soft voice. I had to speak up for him to hear.

He said this walk was his regular ritual. He is a retired Brown University mathematics professor, and along with four other emeriti, he has use of a shared office in the department's building on George Street. It's about a mile from EPOCH, and he said the exercise is good for him. He said it is also good for him to have a place to go.

He had stopped walking while telling me this. It seemed to allow him more focus for speaking. Now he resumed, finally making it beyond the lot to the Pitman Street sidewalk.

The route was a slight uphill, barely noticeable, but the incline was hard for

him. Usually, Frank said, he only walks back from the math office in early afternoon; the downhill being easier. Most mornings, EPOCH gives him a ride there. But perhaps once a week, he likes to try the uphill direction.

He had on a collared shirt with a sweater over it. He had a tan coat over that. He had white socks under his dark shoes. He had brought a wool hat and gloves, but both were in his pockets. I wondered how he was able to bear the cold. The sun glinted off his white hair.

Earlier, I had gone into EPOCH to ask about Frank, and the receptionist said he goes out almost every day.

"Just like the mailman," said the receptionist. "Rain, sleet or snow."

Now, alongside him, I asked his age. "I was born in 1917," said Frank. He is 92. He went to Princeton, and served stateside during the war. Afterwards, he began teaching at Brown, the start of a decades-long career.

The wind picked up and it made him pause. I asked if he liked EPOCH. I had to repeat the question, because he was hunched forward against the elements.

He said he likes it very much. Those who are still mobile, he said, are able to stroll to the Eastside Marketplace, and a nearby drug store.

The receptionist had told me there are 86 residents at EPOCH, each with their own apartments, and different levels of need. Some are self-sufficient, some require help getting

dressed; some need more.

Frank's walking stick was made out of telescoping aluminum. He said his son William, his only child, gave it to him. The son lives on Martha's Vineyard and visits.

Frank continued on, a half step at a time.

I asked what he planned to do today.

Usually, he said, upon arriving at the office, he looks at academic magazines.

Anything else?

He paused to collect his thoughts. Sometimes, he said, he'll sit in on a class.

Did he marry?

Yes, after the war. Her maiden name was Caroline Monks. She spent many years as a librarian at the Gordon School in East Providence. She retired in 1974. She died 18 years ago. Frank keeps a picture of her by his bedside.

It was a good marriage?

"From my point of view, very good indeed," said Frank. "I hope from hers, too." He said he misses her still.

He continued on. Sometimes, I let a silence fall for a few minutes. He seemed to need to concentrate fully on his walking. When he would stop, I would ask more questions.

Did he like teaching?

"Indeed, yes," he said. His favorite part was watching the students develop.

Does he ever get lonely?

He said he tries to be positive, and



Semi-retired Brown professor, Frank Stewart, 92, who lives in the Epoch assisted living facility, walks very slowly to and from Brown with a cane. (Journal Photo: Steve Szydlowski)

find ways to give meaning to his days. That's why he goes to Brown. He acknowledged that often, his time there simply involves catching up on magazines, but it's a destination.

And what does he enjoy back at EPOCH?

"Reading, naturally," he said. He doesn't watch television. He surprised me by saying he's now working his way through a Harry Potter novel. "I've enjoyed what I've read, indeed" said Frank.

By now, my own hands were numb from the weather. I asked if he wanted me to call EPOCH for a car to take him the rest of the way.

"We might as well walk," said Frank. "It's a beautiful day." He said he liked the outdoors.

In time, he would make it to the math office, where, each visit, he steadies himself against an outside pillar as he approaches the door. Once inside, he grabs both handrails and goes upstairs to check in with the secretaries, Natalie and Audrey. Then he goes back down to his shared, bottom-floor office. It's a big, spare space with several desks and a blackboard half-filled with chalk-drawn math equations.

But right now, he still had a half mile to go.

The wind picked up, and again, he hunched forward against it.

I watched as he pressed on alone, imagining the many other souls like him who, in their final years, holding fast to small rituals, make a life.