On September 12th, the day of our annual Romance of the Mission gala, as I hurriedly walked the grounds searching for perfection, I met 100-year-old "Atty." A woman who earned her master’s degree in 1941 in social work. A strong, forgiving, positive woman of color. I took a moment and asked her about her life. She shares with me how her husband’s father lived with them early in her marriage -- he was a freed slave!

Atty visiting the Mission on September 12th

Atty had lived through 100 years of civil rights and had "seen it all." She was a proud American who experienced segregation and never learned to swim because the pool was only allowed one day a week to blacks back then. Out of protest she said she decided to never learn to swim. She did social work cases until 1985 and saw changes that allowed her to be seen as an equal professional -- early in her days she was not allowed to handle cases involving whites. At 100 years of age she cited faith and optimism for her positive reflection on a life that had virtually paralleled U.S. history -- and was historic itself. She was pretty, lively and led me by the hand.

As I reflect on Atty’s visit, I believe the purpose in meeting her was to be reminded of what's really important as we work to execute the daily duties of a landmark that is open 365 days a year to over 300,000 annual visitors.

In what I would describe as the “September Whirlwind” for me and my team — I acknowledge that sometimes we get caught up in the administrative functions of things, asking ourselves repeatedly, “How is a concert going? Is it raising funds for preservation? How is attendance? Is the Store doing OK? When do we start our next project?”

While those are top of mind worries, the ideals of preservation and care for a landmark are what really sustains us. To deliver a landmark into its 238th year means finding new messages and means to keep it relevant while not selling out its deeper meaning. To sustain the Mission’s religious and historic significance requires at some level, a sense of spirituality about the site, its builders, and the people who visit. It also requires us to reexamine what we are doing and push ourselves to do and be more.

While September was marked with a rock-n-roll concert, a romantic gala and a large-scale public effort to hold hands around a mission, it was also a month that clearly reminded me that the Mission is always first a place that welcomes people - each with a history of their own - and to look to them for inspiration.

While September was a maelstrom, it was one worth running. Meeting Atty was a gift, as she was the right person at the right time to remind me of what I already know. I am better for meeting her.

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