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Oakland Tribune, The (CA)

Oakland woman celebrating 105 years with hundreds of family members, friends

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Caption:
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[105-year-old Mary Burgess of Oakland, Calif., right, looks through the newspaper with her daughter Josie Lacy-Gans, who's a mere 79 years old, at Burgess' home, Tuesday, Nov. 3, 2009. \(D. Ross Cameron/Staff\)](#)

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[Mary Burgess of Oakland, Calif. poses for a photograph at her home, Tuesday, Nov. 3, 2009. Burgess celebrated her 105th birthday last week. \(D. Ross Cameron/Staff\)](#)

OAKLAND — Mary Burgess has seen a lot in one century — including the birth and growth of nearly 340 collective children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, great-great-grandchildren, and even great-great-great-grandchildren — with more on the way.

On Oct. 29, Burgess turned 105, and Saturday, relatives from Chicago to Florida will visit her North Oakland home to celebrate the oldest living member of their family. According to Josie Gans, Burgess' daughter and live-in caretaker, more than 200 friends and family members will fill the house, the backyard and the front patio for a birthday barbecue.

Burgess was born in 1904 in Adams, Miss., and raised by an aunt. She gave birth to six children before moving to Oakland in 1956, where she married James Burgess, who is now deceased. In 1957, the couple moved into the same house where she resides today.

The walls of Burgess' dining room read like a framed family tree: literally filled with photographs of family members spanning six generations, all dated by the hairdos of each photo's respective decade. She spends much of her time in this room, quietly reading, watching TV or greeting occasional visitors — and always surrounded by photographic reminders of her immense progeny.

On Tuesday evening, Burgess sat in her dining room, surrounded by balloons and birthday cards. Her wavy white hair had been parted and combed, and two red bobby pins pulled it back on one side. She didn't say much, but smiled at times while her two surviving daughters, Gans and Marie Roberson, sat at the table beside her, discussing plans for her upcoming party.

"Are you looking forward to your party?" Gans asked. Slowly, Burgess pushed a single, soft, "Yeah," past her lips, and gave a big smile. Gans leaned over and kissed her mother's cheek.

Gans moved in with her mother after Burgess had a mild stroke last December, which kept her in the hospital for a month and affected the use of her right hand. Aside from her stroke, Burgess has had few health problems throughout her life. According to relatives, she never drank nor smoked, and at 105 she needs no medication. Gans helps her mother with daily tasks like cooking and cleaning — chores she said were always important to her mother, who did domestic work into her 90s.

"She's been feeding people all her life," Gans said. "She loves the Lord and she loves helping people. Period."

After her own children were grown, Burgess went on to raise two of her grandchildren. "She took my brother and myself in when she 56 years old, and I never want to forget that," said her granddaughter, Betty Shakoor. "She kept this family together. She is this family."

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