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Wednesday, August 12, 2020 » MEDIANEWS GROUP

HEALTH

COVID-19 isolates seniors, takes emotional toll

Mental health professionals express concern about the impact of long term isolation on senior citizens during the COVID-19 crisis.

By Ron Devlin
rdevlin@readingeagle.com
@rondevlinre on Twitter

As Berks County's chief mental health officer, Edward B. Michalik understands the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on senior citizens and their families.

But it's not as a mental health professional, but as a son that gives Michalik special insight into the emotional trauma confronting Berks County families in the era of coronavirus.

Michalik's mother is in lockdown at a nursing home, and he hasn't been allowed to see her in person since March.

"She just doesn't understand why her son doesn't come to visit her," confided Michalik, who talks to his mother by phone. "I feel terrible, I tell her I love her and I miss her."

Numerous families across Berks County are in the same position, said Michalik, the county's mental health developmental disabilities administrator.

"I share the same pain as families who can't see their loved ones," he said. "I feel badly for seniors and their families."

COVID-19 has taken its harshest toll on senior citizens, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

A recent analysis by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 80 percent of the more than 150,000 COVID-19 related deaths in the U.S. were among persons over age 65.



BEN HASTY — READING EAGLE

Barbara Mills, right, Body Recall instructor, leads the exercise class at Berks Encore. Front to back are Eva Bears, Elaine Hartman and Peg Wrede.

Strict measures

Given the risk to seniors,

nursing homes and retirement facilities have enacted strict measures to protect their residents.

Many seniors have been in lockdown for more than four

months. And with COVID-19 cases on the rise in most states, it's difficult to determine when

policies that separate seniors from loved ones will cease.

SENIORS » PAGE 2




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BEN HASTY — READING EAGLE

Eva Beears, left, and Elaine Hartman participate in a senior exercise class held at Berks Encore, a senior services organization in Reading.



BEN HASTY — READING EAGLE

Barbara Mills, front, Body Recall instructor, leads the exercise class. Participating are, from left, Elaine Hartman, and Peg Wrede, both of Reading.

Seniors

FROM PAGE 1

Among mental health professionals, there's growing concern about the long-term effects of isolation on seniors and their families.

Michalik recently testified at a hearing on the mental health effects of COVID-19 before the House Human Services Committee in Harrisburg.

"We're still trying to wrap our arms around the devastating long-term effects of this disaster," he said.

Gerard Mike, Beaver County behavioral health administrator, testified with Michalik.

"As the pandemic continues, I would like to echo Dr. Michalik's observation that scores of Pennsylvanians will be dealing with anxiety, grief and guilt over the loss of loved ones," Mike testified. "Friends, families and neighbors will confront the anxiety and stress associated with long-term isolation and loneliness."

Ann Barlet, Berks County Office on Aging manager of public advocacy, said COVID-19-imposed isolation has prevented seniors from participating in milestone family events.

They're not able to see their grandchildren or attend birthday parties or high school and college graduations, she said.

Neither can they attend funeral services for longtime friends.

Barlet said phone calls, window visits and sessions on Skype or Zoom are critical in letting seniors know they are not alone.

"It's important to create a routine," she said, "to create a sense of normalcy."

Home alone, feeling alone

LuAnn Oatman, Berks Encore CEO, said the COVID-19 crisis has heightened the isolation that many seniors experience in normal times.

Even among seniors who live independently, she said, there has been an increased sense of isolation and fear. Unless they make a concerted effort, she said, seniors can feel totally alone.

"From March through July, they've been home alone," she said. "It's been bad for their mental health."

Berks Encore's senior citizens centers had been closed since March 17, though volunteers continued to deliver Meals On Wheels to shut-ins.

Berks Encore delivered about 6,500 meals and some 2,000 emergency meals during the crisis.

About two weeks ago, all but one of the centers re-opened for socialization, Oatman said.

The agency operates centers in Reading, Fleetwood, Shillington, Strausstown, Wernersville and Birdsboro.



BEN HASTY — READING EAGLE

Barbara Mills, front, Body Recall instructor, leads the exercise class. Back from left are Elaine Hartman and Peg Wrede, both of Reading.

Classes in yoga and tai chi offer socialization as well as physical activity. The Strausstown center has a watercolor painting class, and Reading offers bingo and a farmers market.

Seniors can also register for armchair travel to Ireland on Zoom.

Lori Gerhart, Encore's com-

munications and marketing director, stressed the importance of keeping seniors engaged.

"It's important," she said, "for seniors to have something to do other than sitting at home."

Expressing relief

Seniors at a recent Sit & Get Fit class at Encore's Reading

center expressed relief at being able to get out of the house.

"It feels good about coming back to the center," Gloria Minor of Reading said, "and seeing some people I haven't seen for a while."

Martha Hall, who lives in a Reading high-rise apartment, missed going to church and mingling with other residents.

To escape the boredom, she took walks and drove around in her car. She also managed to find time to volunteer as a packer of Meals On Wheels at the center.

"I enjoy the exercise," she said of the Sit & Get Fit program. "I'm happy that it has returned to the center, along with movies, bingo and pokeno."

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SPOT OF T

Lessons learned during the pandemic

By Terry Alburger

It certainly has been a long six months. In my usual Polyanna fashion, I like to look at the positive aspects of that time. I must say, I have learned a few things.

First and foremost, I have added a new accessory to my wardrobe. I now have masks in multiple colors and styles. I can coordinate my outfits with my masks, I can support my favorite teams, I can highlight my love of animals, all by my choice of mask. I've learned to get creative.

For me, it is not a question of if I will wear a mask, but rather, which of my masks to choose for any given day. Just one more accessory to colorize my wardrobe.

Speaking of masks, they have made getting ready for work in the mornings so much simpler! My face is only visible from the eyes up, ergo I do not have to worry about makeup south of my line of vision. I do believe a mask is the greatest concealer ever invented. I save a fortune on lipstick.

Since I work in health care, I am now aware that during the course of the day, I am exposed to lots of germs. This is not just at work, but at the grocery store, the gas station, the bank, etc. Germs abound.

I have adopted healthier habits that I believe will continue into "normal" life, if that ever resumes. I now have a supply of gloves and hand sanitizer in my car and my purse, and I am ready at all times.

At the end of the day, I take a nice refreshing shower, washing away the outside world. This has many benefits. A nice hot evening shower is relax-

ing, gives me time to decompress from the day's events, to collect my thoughts, and it leaves me feeling renewed. We all need quiet time and for me, this is my quiet time.

Another benefit to nighttime showers is that my morning routine, which once took the better part of an hour, minimum, is now greatly reduced. No morning shower and not much in the way of makeup all leads to extra time in the mornings to relax, play with my dog and get to work on time. All three of those things are of equal importance in my world.

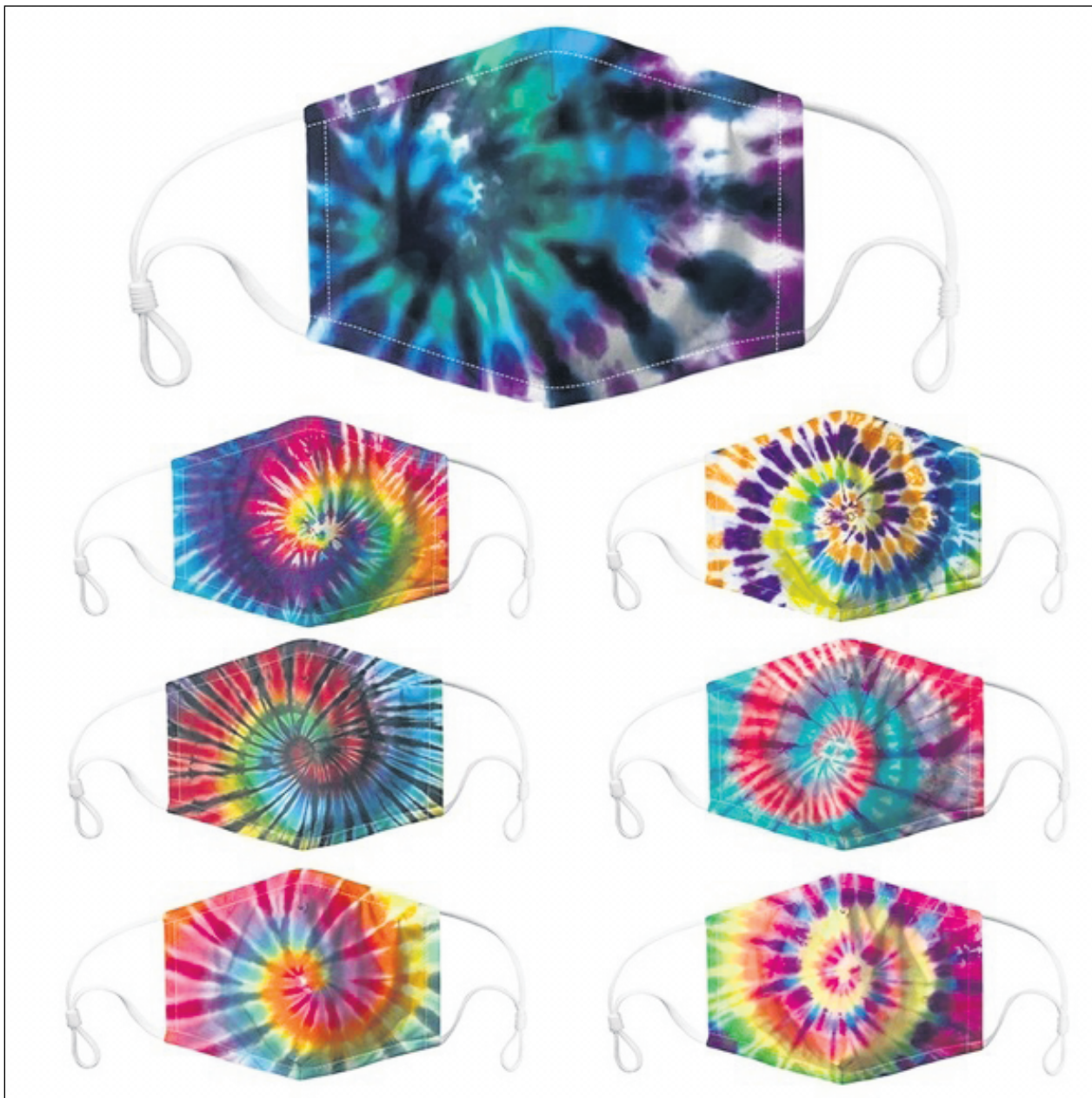
I've learned introspection: the ability to sit quietly and ponder during the abundance of alone time over these past six weeks. Initially, I created a mental to-do list and thought about all I could accomplish in this newly found, mandated spare time.

I quickly realized that it does not work that way. I learned to let myself feel the emotions of these times. Each day is different. Some days I feel like becoming a couch potato for the entire day. Some days I want to take on every garden on my property. Some days I'm in between.

I have learned that it's OK to be any of the above, to go with the flow. By sitting all day, I do a lot of thinking, I catch up with my emotions and even get inspired to write. Not a bad thing.

I have most definitely learned acceptance. I cannot change the global situation. I cannot cure COVID-19. (Oh, how I wish I could!) But I can do my part to work towards a better world. Dare I say it? Yes.

I will wear my mask to



Many people have made colorful face masks part of their wardrobe.

protect others. Each of you. And I will hope that you will do the same to keep me safe. I have accepted that this is the responsible thing to do. I have learned to adapt to this new fashion statement.

I think the most important lesson that I have learned is appreciation. For over four

months, I did not see any family members in person. Sure, video chats are great, as are texts and social media. But none of that replaces a hug. I am blessed that I was quarantined with my husband, and we have always made the most of difficult situations along our journey together.

But this one — this on-

going COVID speed bump in that journey — has been one of our biggest challenges. The hugs of my grandchildren were sorely missed. Once the world opened up just a bit and we were able to get together, it was they who ran to me for that first hug. Obviously, the children felt it, too. Another lesson learned. Re-

member, they too are coping with difficult new normals.

So, though we are still dealing with COVID, still wearing masks and gloves, bear in mind that this too shall pass. Thought I'm still being abundantly careful, I am grateful for the lessons learned. I won't soon forget them.

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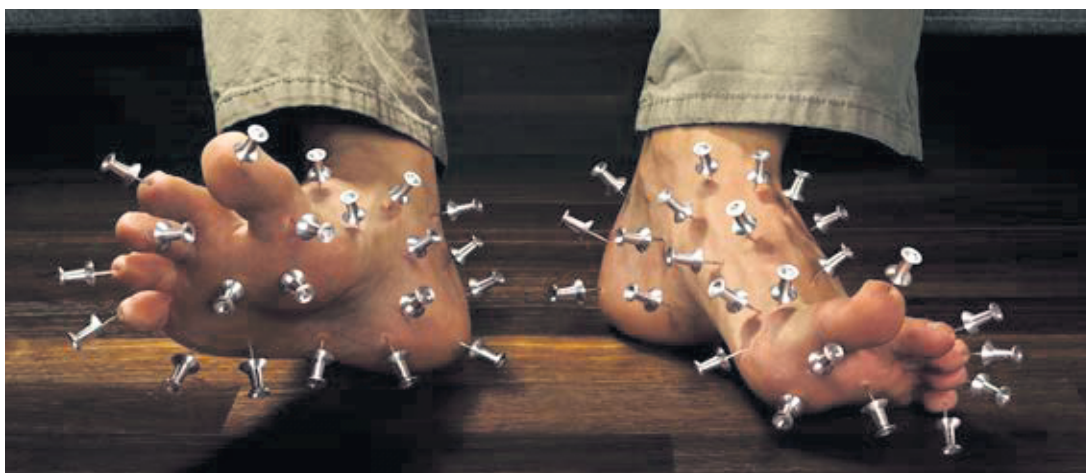
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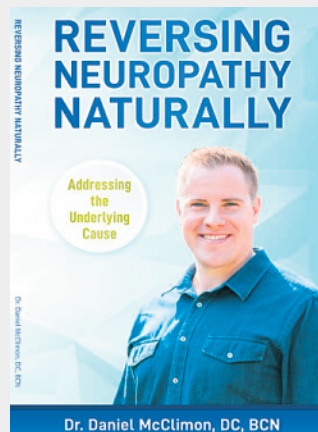


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GOLF

Blind golfers and sighted coaches welcomed at Middle Atlantic Blind Golf Association

By Catherine Nold
Montgomery County Association for the Blind

More adults are continuing to enjoy golf even after losing their vision. The Middle Atlantic Blind Golf Association (MABGA) is making it possible.

MABGA's mission is to provide women, men and children who are blind or visually impaired the opportunity to enjoy the challenges and rewards that golf provides.

MABGA is a longstanding partner of the Montgomery County Association for the Blind (MCAB) that has two clients who are golfers with MABGA.

Serving blind golfers since 1948, MABGA has 110 totally blind and visually impaired golfers and sighted coaches ranging in age from late 20s to mid-80s.

Adult members participate in approximately 35 golf outings each year, as well as one special outing with a local PGA professional as a partner and an annual fundraising charity tournament.

At the 2020 season-opening golf outing in June at the Stonewall Country Club, Suzanne Woodall and Shawn Britt, both clients of MCAB, joined 16 blind fellow golfers for a day on the beautifully manicured course in East Nantmeal Township, Chester County. Woodall of Hatfield, Montgomery County, just started taking lessons and playing in golf outings with MABGA this season.

"My fellow golfers are nice people and very competitive," she said. "The outings get me out of the house onto some beautiful and exclusive courses. It's really



Suzanne Woodall of Hatfield, Montgomery County, who is visually impaired, takes lessons and plays golf regularly with the Middle Atlantic Blind Golf Association.

fun!"

Britt of Limerick became legally blind just over two years ago.

"The game and camaraderie makes me feel part of something," Britt said. "I'm around people who have similar challenges to myself. I enjoy the socializing and the game. It's a good feeling."

Many golfers who lose their sight later in life think their golfing days are over. Not so, says Mario Tobia, president MABGA.

"I had been an avid golfer before losing my sight," To-

bia said. "At that time, I worried that my golfing days were over."

Tobia joined MABGA in 2000 and began a whole new golfing experience. In the past 20 years, he achieved great success as a blind golfer, including being the top U.S. ranked blind golfer six times, and he finished fourth in the world twice.

"The main emphasis for people joining MABGA is both social and therapeutic," Tobia said. "It is an opportunity to get out in the fresh air and socialize with

your peers who are experiencing the same joys and challenges in life as you are. It's like nothing you've ever experienced."

Alan Test is a disabled, legally blind retired Vietnam veteran who presently serves on the Board of Governors and is the membership chairperson.

"I joined MABGA about four years ago," he said. "Not knowing much about golf or the organization, I found a great group of people who include both legally blind or totally blind members. They are all willing to go out of their way to make you feel comfortable with the organization."

Whether you're new to golf or a seasoned golfer, it's easy to give MABGA a trial

run. Potential new members are invited to two outings initially to give them an idea of what MABGA is all about.

Each member must have a sighted coach with them at every outing, after which the member is invited to join for \$100, the cost of annual membership.

MABGA plays more than 35 courses a year, and all outings and lunches are included in that one-time fee. The only additional monetary commitment requested is participation in the annual invitational golf outing, which has an entrance fee.

MABGA coaches are volunteers and are given the opportunity to play at all outings with a member

team, at no charge. Lunch is included.

"We are always in need of more coaches," Test said.

Coaches have golf experience but aren't necessarily experts. They just have the desire to get out and experience life with a blind or visually impaired golfer. MABGA expects coaches to attend at least three outings per season.

To join MABGA, blind golfers must live in Philadelphia or its suburbs, South Jersey, Delaware and the surrounding area. All of the golf outings are hosted by golf courses within those areas. Coaches provide the transportation to and from the courses.

For membership information, to become a coach or to donate, send an email inquiry to info@mabga.org, call MABGA at 215-745-2323 or visit the website mabga.org.

MABGA is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation.

In addition, the junior golf program with 78 blind golfers has expanded to North Jersey and is building of a new course on the grounds of the New York Institute for Special Education in the Bronx, N.Y. This is the second course built by MABGA, the first being at the Overbrook School for the Blind in Philadelphia.

Montgomery County Association for the Blind (MCAB), founded in 1945, is the only local organization to provide continuous specialized services to county residents of all ages with visual impairments. MCAB's mission is to enhance the quality of life for people coping with blindness or vision impairments through education, support and advocacy, and to strive to prevent blindness through education and screening programs.

For more information, email Catherine Nold at cnold@mcab.org or call 215-661-9800, ext. 413.



Suzanne Woodall, who is visually impaired, gets help from her volunteer coach.

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ENTERTAINMENT

Heritage of Green Hills residents have fun just chillin'

Reading Eagle

To stay cool in the summer heat, The Heritage of Green Hills, a healthy life plan community in Cumru Township, threw a "Just Chillin'" party on the patio. Residents hung out with

special guests Sven and Olaf from "Frozen" while enjoying ice-cream-sandwiches. Then everyone was invited into the air-conditioned exercise studio for a socially distanced movie party featuring the snow-filled Disney film.



COURTESY OF THE HERITAGE OF GREEN HILLS

Heritage of Green Hills resident Shirley Gundrum



COURTESY OF THE HERITAGE OF GREEN HILLS

Heritage of Green Hills residents Ralph and Susan Rothenberger



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QUILTING



COURTESY OF THE HICKMAN

A residents of The Hickman with her individualized quilt.

Residents at The Hickman get personalized quilts

The Hickman

In 2019, the Brandywine Valley Quilters, a nonprofit, volunteer-based quilting guild, contacted The Hickman to make lap quilts for their residents.

“One of our members is a former employee of The Hickman, and we heard so many wonderful things about the community, so we decided to make lap quilts for their residents,” said Elaine O’Connell, chair of the Brandywine Valley Quilters’ Charity Corner.

“Knowing we were unable to make quilts for each individual living at The Hickman, we decided to focus on the residents of the community’s memory care neighborhood.”

Since 1891, The Hickman has provided a safe,

affordable and thriving living option for the seniors of Chester County. Located in the heart of the Borough of West Chester, the personal care community has 109 resident suites. The first floor of the Anna T. Jeanes Building, one of the

two buildings that makes up the community, is a secure memory care neighborhood.

Named in honor of the Darlington family, the neighborhood includes 22 resident suites, a formal living room, kitchen and din-

ing area, activities space and a secure outdoor garden.

Focusing on the residents of the Darlington Neighborhood, the quilters were able to personalize each of the quilts.

QUILTS » PAGE 7

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With Faith Woodward, Director of Admissions and Marketing at Barclay Friends—to learn more, please call 610-696-5211 or visit our website, <http://bf.kendal.org/>.



Quilts

FROM PAGE 6

“We were delighted to hear that the quilting guild wanted to not just make quilts for our residents, but also personalize them based on their individual interests,” said Renee Adams, Darlington program manager. “I was happy to provide them with non-confidential information, such as their favorite colors, activities and places.”

The group took approximately nine months to find fabrics and sew the quilts. All were completed by June of 2020 and were delivered to The Hickman.

“The Hickman was planning to invite guild members to present the quilts to our residents, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic we had to increase our safety measures, causing us to cancel

our plans,” Adams said.

New safety protocols were implemented in March, which only allow staff members and medical professionals to enter the community. This was one of the many measures put in place to keep the residents and employees safe and healthy at the start of the pandemic.

Although the guild members were unable to attend the presentation, The Hickman staff still celebrated the distribution of the quilts to the residents on July 8.

“Our residents were very surprised and happy to receive the quilts,” Adams said. “They loved putting them on their laps and looking at the personalized details.”

“Unfortunately, we were unable to be there when the residents received their quilts,” O’Connell said. “However, we hope

the quilts will enrich their lives in some way, especially during this unprecedented time.”

One of the missions of the Brandywine Valley Quilters Guild is to establish and promote philanthropic endeavors through quilts. Guild members make and donate over 300 quilts each year to a variety of organizations.

They sponsor Community Service projects, offer scholarships, and also make and raffle a quilt at their biennial quilt show to raise funds for educational and charitable purposes. For additional information on the Brandywine Valley Quilters, visit www.brandywinevalleyquilters.org.

For more information on The Hickman, or if your group is interested in conducting a similar project to benefit their residents, visit www.thehickman.org or call 484-760-6300.



COURTESY OF THE HICKMAN

A residents of The Hickman with his individualized quilt.



COURTESY OF THE HICKMAN

A residents of The Hickman with her individualized quilt.



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SENIOR LIFE

Q&A: Senior well-being is ‘more important than ever’

Erickson Living

R. Alan Butler, chief executive officer at Erickson Living, manager of Ann's Choice and Maris Grove in Pennsylvania, shared his unique insights about the overall impact of COVID-19 on the senior living industry and the differences between senior living communities and stand-alone nursing homes.

Q: How has the coronavirus pandemic impacted seniors in this country?

A: The COVID-19 pandemic has brought an unprecedented level of attention to the issue of senior living in the United States. While the virus that causes the disease is indiscriminate, certain segments of the population, including seniors, are particularly susceptible to its virulence.

Seen through the lens of national demographic trends, the disproportionate toll COVID-19 is taking on older Americans makes clear that protecting the well-being of seniors is more important than ever.

Q: The news about the virus's impact on older Americans has been especially devastating.

A: It has. Those of us at Erickson Living and our managed communities, whose mission is to help people live better lives, are acutely aware of the heartbreaking news emanating from certain quarters of the industry, particularly stand-alone nursing homes.

Q: How are stand-alone nursing homes different from senior living communities like Ann's Choice and Maris Grove?

A: While many people and media outlets use the term nursing home to represent the entire senior living industry, the truth is that stand-alone nursing homes serve a small and distinct segment of the senior population: those who need long-term care to address chronic health conditions that prohibit residents from living independently but

don't require ongoing hospital care. Unfortunately, these chronic health conditions can greatly increase vulnerability to a wide range of pathogens including the novel coronavirus.

Other types of senior living communities are significantly different than stand-alone nursing homes. For instance, continuing care retirement communities (CCRCs), like those managed by Erickson Living, provide assisted living and skilled nursing services; however, the vast majority of CCRC residents live independently in apartment homes located on largely self-sufficient campuses. This environment provides those living independently with the social, intellectual and wellness opportunities they need, offers safeguards from the spread of disease and diminishes the sense of isolation that social distancing is imposing on people of all ages.

Q: What are some of those opportunities?

A: For example, throughout the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, employees at Ann's Choice and Maris Grove and other Erickson Living-managed communities were able to provide extra support to independent living residents by delivering meals and snacks directly to residents' doors, along with everyday necessities such as toiletries and prescription medications. Residents also have ready access to campus-based telemedicine services as well as on-site medical facilities to accommodate in-person consultations.

With all their pressing needs met right on campus, independent living residents could remain safely in their apartment homes. Consistent with guidelines issued by local, state and federal health agencies during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, visitation was restricted to mitigate the spread of the virus; however, well-managed CCRCs are designed to alleviate the sense of loneliness seniors living by themselves in

houses can experience.

Many CCRCs assisted residents with FaceTime, Skype and Zoom, so residents could remain engaged with family, friends and neighbors as they minimized their exposure to the virus. At Erickson Living, our dedicated in-house television channels produced a wide range of specialized programming, from virtual fitness classes, happy hours and worship services to on-line book, music and movie clubs.

This gave residents a wealth of interactive options to ensure they maintained valued relationships and preferred activities while doing their part to “flatten the curve.”

Q: Have all these measures helped?

A: While no geographic area is immune to COVID-19, many CCRCs have been successful in containing its spread and keeping the vast majority of residents and staff free of the virus. By strictly adhering to proven mitigation protocols, these CCRCs demonstrated the ability to act in a thorough, timely manner to support residents throughout this unprecedented public health emergency.

As the population of American seniors continues to grow, so too will the demand for senior living options that anticipate public health threats and proactively address risk factors. It will be up to CCRCs to innovate and adapt in order to continue protecting the physical and emotional well-being of older Americans committed to maintaining active and engaged lifestyles.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made clear that meeting this challenge is more than a professional responsibility. It is a moral obligation.

Ann's Choice, one of 20 continuing care retirement communities developed and managed by Erickson Living, is situated on a scenic 103-acre campus in Warminster, Bucks County. The not-



COURTESY OF ERICKSON LIVING

R. Alan Butler is the chief executive officer of Erickson Living, a national leader in developing and managing continuing care retirement communities.

for-profit community of more than 1,900 residents and 1,000 employees is governed by its own board of directors, affiliated with National Senior Campuses, who provide independent financial and operational oversight of the community. Additional information about Ann's Choice can be found at AnnsChoice-Community.com.

About Maris Grove: Maris Grove, one of 20 continuing care retirement communities

developed and managed by Erickson Living, is situated on a scenic 87-acre campus in Glen Mills, Delaware County. The not-for-profit community of more than 1,900 residents and 1,000 employees is governed by its own board of directors, affiliated with National Senior Campuses, who provide independent financial and operational oversight of the community. Additional information about Maris Grove can be found at MarisGrove.com.



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GARDENING

No place like home

Bill and Donna Witwer have created a paradise on 3 acres in Cumru Twp.

By Kathy Folk
kfolk@readingeagle.com
@kbick on Twitter

Bill Witwer's job requires a lot of travel.

So coming home to the 3 acres of paradise in Cumru Township where he and his wife, Donna, live is like having their own vacation destination.

Witwer, the sales director for Loading Automation Inc. with headquarters in Wilmington, N.C., said he comes by his love of gardening naturally.

"I grew up in Lancaster County, and I picked up the green thumb from my mom," he said. "She always had great looking flower and vegetable gardens."

Bill said he gets inspiration from his mom by looking at how she arranged her gardens and took the time to nurture everything to promote good growth.

The Witwers each do their share of the work in

their garden. Donna, 71, has an eye for color, and Bill, 66, enjoys building things in his free time, he said.

"Donna takes care of doing all of the annual plants, all the potted flowers, and I do a lot of the perennials and hardscaping," Bill said. "Donna has a decorator's eye in her potting and flower arrangements."

The Witwers moved into their farmhouse property in 1994 and have been renovating the inside and outside ever since.

"We look over all the old photos and see how much of a transformation has taken place here in over 26 years," Bill said. "It seems just like yesterday when we started all this. Everything goes by so quickly, so take time to enjoy it."

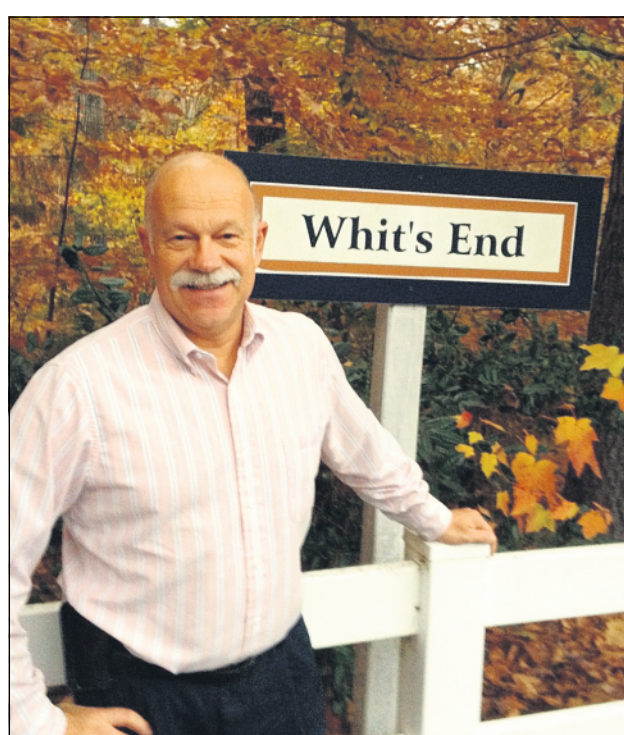
A focal point of their garden is a quarter-acre pond, which had been neglected for many years before the Witwers bought the property.

HOME » PAGE 11



COURTESY OF BILL WITWER

Donna Witwer on the back patio of their Cumru Township home.



COURTESY OF BILL WITWER

Bill Witwer in his Cumru Township garden.



COURTESY OF BILL WITWER

A quarter-acre pond on their Cumru Township property has been a labor of love for Bill and Donna Witwer.



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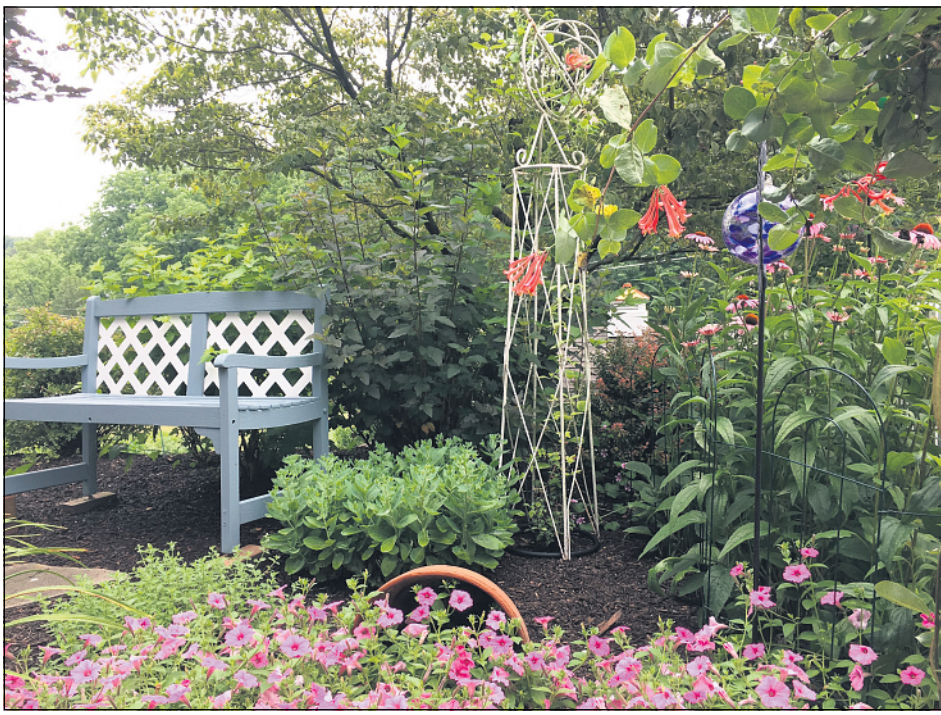
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COURTESY OF BILL WITWER

A bench and an obelisk in the garden.



COURTESY OF BILL WITWER

A bench sits next to a pathway lined with bubblegum petunias and daylilies.

Home

FROM PAGE 10

“All I did for several years was rake off lots of thick scum and algae,” Bill said. “I read up on what was needed, then started to plant water lilies, lotus, water iris and blue pickerel.

“I also added anacharis, which is a great plant to help filter the water, reduce oxygen levels, and provides

food and shelter for fish.” Bill also added fish such as channel catfish, bluegills and shiners to help control algae growth.

“Then we also added some koi that are fun to feed and watch them grow,” he said. “We even give them names, like pets. I added some tadpoles that developed into a huge frog haven. They make so much noise at night that Donna has to sleep with her white noise turned on, to drown

out their constant croaking ... which I love to hear.”

Gardening is always filled with trial and error, and Bill said the worst mistake they made in their garden was getting heavy red clay top soil that didn't allow anything to grow in it.

“We're still trying to break it down, and we've removed much of it,” he said. “I should have asked and looked at the ‘top soil’ before it was dumped and spread out all over the flowerbed areas we

were developing.”

Bill said Donna likes spring and all the new flowers that season brings.

“I do like the springtime, too, but I like the changes in all 4 seasons, and how it looks and changes the property,” he said.

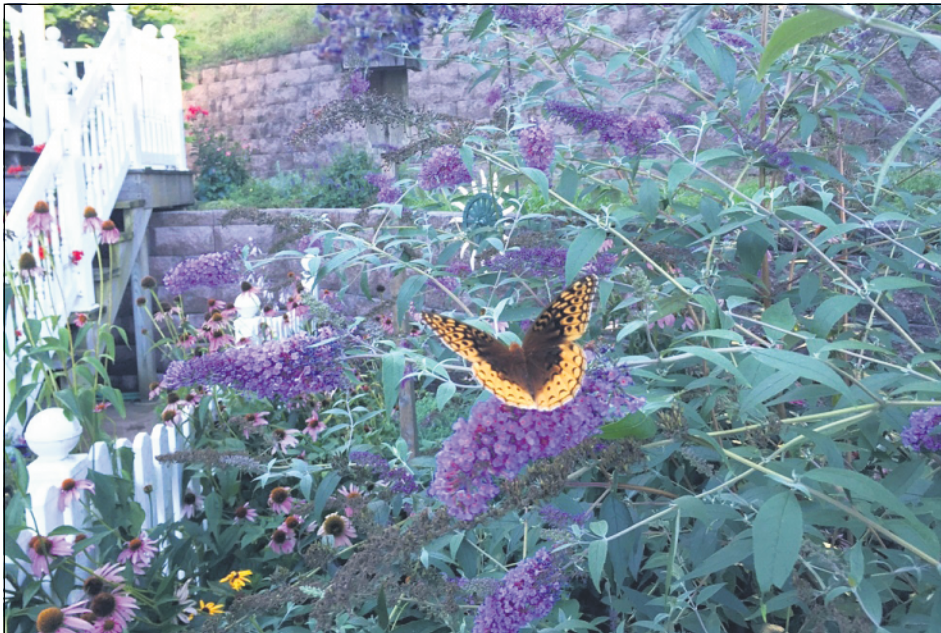
Bill advised gardeners to

be patient and not expect instant results.

“Take your time and research what you would like to see,” he said. “Donna enjoys our car rides, especially in our 1964 1/2 red Mustang convertible, to see other people's gardens and landscaping ideas. As in life,

don't be afraid to fail, as many plants don't do as well as you would like in your environment.

“Even some ideas that we thought would look great, turn out to be not so great. We just keep reinventing the gardens, tweaking this, and changing that.”



COURTESY OF BILL WITWER

A butterfly alights on a butterfly bush.



COURTESY OF BILL WITWER

Purple conflower and impatiens along a walkway in the garden.




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100 YEARS OLD

Pandemic changes woman's birthday celebration

By Michelle Lynch
mlynch@readingeagle.com
@BerksMichelle on Twitter

Mary "Evelyn" Graeff has a lifetime of stories to share — a century's worth to be exact.

Graeff, a resident of the Lutheran Home at Topton, celebrated her 100th birthday Thursday.

"Originally we were going to have a huge party with family from out of state, but with the COVID-19 situation that was not possible," Graeff's granddaughter Kelly Michael said.

Instead, Graeff watched through a window while her daughter and son-in-law Linda and Tom Michael of Muhlenberg Township, their adult children and two of their grandchildren sang "Happy Birthday" and waved on the other side.

"My grandmother is the sweetest woman on the planet and deserves to be celebrated," Kelly Michael said. "She did not have an

easy life, but I never heard her utter a bad or negative word about anyone."

A daughter of Noah and Beulah Horning, Graeff was reared in Lititz, Lancaster County.

As a girl, she used to walk downtown to the pretzel factory, founded by her great-grandfather Julius Sturgis, and help twist the pretzels, Michael said.

During the World War II era, Graeff lived with her then husband, Elmer, a Navy MP, who was stationed at Joint Expeditionary Base-Fort Story, Virginia Beach, Va.

"While working as waitress on the base, she spilled soup on Fred Astaire," Michael said, noting the dancer, singer and movie star was performing on the base with the USO. "To this day, she tells waitresses this story, and of course, most have no idea who Fred Astaire was."

Graeff and her husband divorced in the 1960s, her

granddaughter said, and Graeff reared their children, Mary Cannici, now of Florida, and twins, Scott Graeff, now of Colorado, and Linda Michael, largely on her own.

Of all the stories her grandmother tells, Michael said, one stands out as most memorable.

"When she took the bus downtown, she would sit in the back," Michael said of her grandmother.

Back in the 1960s, Michael said, tradition relegated Black people to the back of the bus, even in the north.

"My grandmother did not think that was right, so she sat in the back," she said.

Strongly independent throughout her life, Graeff lived alone in a Shillington apartment until a few months ago, when she moved in with Linda and Tom. After a series of ministrokes brought on memory loss, she moved to the Topton home, Kelly Michael said.



COURTESY OF KELLY MICHAEL

Mary "Evelyn" Graeff, a resident of the Lutheran Home at Topton, celebrated her 100th birthday Thursday. Due to precautions taken to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus, Graeff's family sang "Happy Birthday" and waved from the outside her window.



COURTESY OF KELLY MICHAEL

Linda Michael of Muhlenberg Township; her daughter Kelly Michael of Exeter Township; Linda's husband, Tim Michael; Kelly's son, Rudy, 2; Kelly's sister, Jill DeLong of Fleetwood; and Jill's daughter, Emily DeLong, also of Fleetwood; gathered outside a window Thursday to celebrate the birthday of family matriarch Mary "Evelyn" Graeff, a resident of the Lutheran Home at Topton.

We can tell you everything you need to know about our senior living community, but we'll let our residents do that for us...

"I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the staff for all they do for their residents! My Uncle Bud has been very happy at your facility, and truly enjoys and appreciates all who care for him! When my husband and I have visited we see how engaging and dedicated the staff is, not only to the residents but to the families who come to visit their loved ones. Our minds are at ease knowing our uncle is in such good hands!"

— Jill R. and Rod S.,
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SHILLINGTON

Woman gets 90th birthday drive-by

By Ron Devlin
rdevlin@readingeagle.com
@rondevlinre on Twitter

Lorraine Berns doesn't like to be the object of attention, but she was center stage Tuesday morning when a column of first responders paraded past her Shillington home.

With sirens blaring, neighbors lined the South Miller Street and burst out in a hearty rendition of "Happy Birthday."

Lorraine turned 90 on Tuesday, and her children arranged a drive-by with Shillington's Keystone Fire Co. No. 1 as a surprise birthday present.

"I never expected anything like this," said Lorraine, who was surrounded by her daughters and grandchildren. "I'll remember this for a long time."

Michele Caba of Phoenix-

ville said the event brought out her mother's emotional side.

"My mom was so surprised she had tears in her eyes," said Caba. "It was the best surprise ever."

Caba and her sister, Pam Gaspari of Shillington, were with their mother when three firefighting apparatus came blaring down the street.

Given the uncertainty of the COVID-19 crisis, Caba said, it was touching to see neighbors turn out and show the love they have for her mother.

Gaspari also felt the love in the air.

"My mother is a kind, loving and giving person who's always been there for everybody," said Gaspari, a retired Berks County employee. "She's just a sweet lady, and she deserved to be honored on her birthday."

Brian Berns, who lives in Delaware, was unable to attend the celebration.

"She is the anchor of our family," said Berns, 61, a physical education teacher and football coach in Camden, Delaware. "She's the glue that holds us together."

George Berns, Lorraine's husband, was a Marine Corps veteran who received a Purple Heart in World War II. A longtime worker at Carpenter Steel, he died in 2014.

Lorraine, who once worked at Berkshire Knitting Mills, continues to live independently in the home she and her late husband built in 1963.

"My mother is a strong Pennsylvania Dutch woman who still mows her grass every Saturday," Brian Berns said. "She still operates her snow blower."



COURTESY OF MICHELE CABA

Lorraine Berns' family went all out to celebrate her 90th birthday with a drive-by of fire apparatus and banners at her Shillington home on Tuesday. Berns (yellow shirt) and her family at the birthday drive-by.

BOYERTOWN

Chestnut Knoll helps couple attend granddaughter's wedding

The senior living community provided a shuttle bus, so grandparents could safely enjoy the wedding ceremony

By Lisa Mitchell
lmitchell@21st-centurymedia.com
@facebook.com/northeastberksnews/

When Shannon Hoffman-Sminkey's wedding plans were hindered by the coronavirus COVID-19, Chestnut Knoll in Boyertown ensured her grandparents wouldn't miss her big day.

The senior living community provided a complimentary shuttle bus, and, although quarantined, her grandparents were able to safely enjoy the wedding ceremony, Chestnut Knoll announced in a release.

"It was a dream come true to be able to have my grandparents be a part of my wedding day, especially during this trying time," said Shannon in the release. "I'm also so glad that they got to witness it in a safe way."

"A pandemic doesn't change the needs of our residents. Many staff and residents have lived, worked or worshiped

side-by-side one another, so it's in our nature to go the extra mile for them," said Shawn Barndt, executive director.

"We truly are one big family." Shannon began her career at Chestnut Knoll working for At Home Services, which provides non-medical caregivers to assist seniors with everyday tasks in their homes.

Following high school, Shannon continued a path in health care. She enrolled in the physician assistant studies program at King's College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, where she graduated with a master's degree. She then returned to Chestnut Knoll to care for residents, as well as working in internal medicine at Pottstown Medical Group.

Chestnut Knoll is well-known for its impeccable care or what staff members like to call "neighbors helping neighbors." This is one of the reasons Shannon's mother Denise, a former employee, entrusted the care of her parents to Chestnut Knoll.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

On Shannon Hoffman-Sminkey's wedding day, Chestnut Knoll in Boyertown ensured her grandparents wouldn't miss her big day. The senior living community provided a complimentary shuttle bus, and, although quarantined, her grandparents were able to safely enjoy the wedding ceremony.

HEALTH

Telemedicine keeps Maris Grove residents safe during COVID-19

By Dorrie Anshel

Telemedicine, remote consultations with physicians over a computer or tablet, has existed for decades.

Today most insurers, including Medicare, offer coverage for telehealth services.

Reminiscent of the house calls we all remember, it's a convenient way to see the doctor, especially when you're not feeling well.

Use of telemedicine reached a new level during the COVID-19 outbreak, because patients could see doctors from the comfort and safety of their homes.

The medical center at Maris Grove, the Erickson

Living-managed senior living community in Glen Mills, Delaware County, implemented the practice in mid-March for just those reasons.

"We can effectively treat a number of minor illnesses, like allergies, rashes and urinary tract infections, via telemedicine," said the community's medical director, Dr. Cathy Smith. "We also can provide routine follow-ups for chronic illnesses, like diabetes, arthritis and hypertension."

"As we move through reopening, we will likely continue a mix of telehealth, in-office and home visits. Residents with chronic conditions requiring immediate attention and acute, non-COVID related problems will be

seen in the office."

She said that residents are grateful for telehealth visits but look forward to resuming face-to-face interaction.

"Being seen in person can help to address the isolation we feel during a situation like COVID-19," Smith said. "However, safety is our top priority, and we will continue to follow rigorous infection control, safe distancing and PPE guidelines to protect residents and staff."

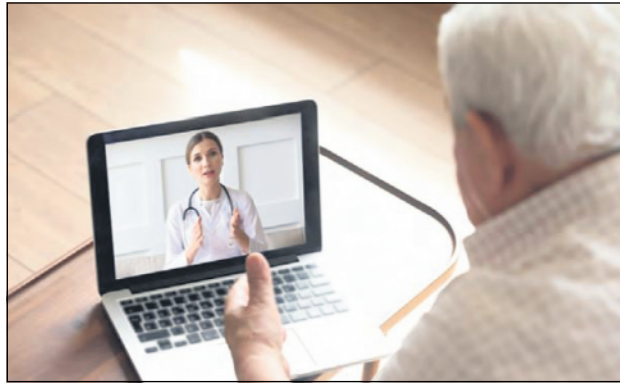
Maris Grove Executive Director Maureen Heckler agreed.

"During the COVID-19 outbreak, keeping everyone safe and healthy extends to every aspect of our operations," Heckler said. "In ad-

dition to offering telehealth, we maintain strict social-distancing policies, deliver meals and mail to residents' doors and provide free essentials, like toilet paper and toothpaste, from our on-campus pharmacy. These are just a few examples of how we are meeting this challenge head on."

To learn more about Maris Grove's commitment to senior health and wellness, visit MarisGroveCommunity.com.

About Maris Grove: Maris Grove, one of 20 continuing care retirement communities developed and managed by Erickson Living, is situated on a scenic 87-acre campus in Glen Mills. The not-for-profit community of more than



COURTESY OF PETRA SHAW

Telemedicine allows doctors, like those who work on-site at Maris Grove, to remain in contact with patients and treat concerns that don't require an in-person visit.

1,900 residents and 1,000 employees is governed by its own board of directors, affiliated with National Senior Campuses, who provide independent financial and operational oversight of the community. Additional information about Maris Grove can be found at MarisGroveCommunity.com.

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