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CORONAVIRUS

'A WAKE-UP CALL'



A senior citizen, Shirley Peters, waves to loved ones, standing outside the Friends Home of Kennett Square Borough, separated this March from 'social' contact in wake of the coronavirus pandemic. She waves to her daughters Leslie Bleggi and Holly Peters alongside her son-in-law, Doug Bleggi, Bleggi's husband on Tuesday evening in southern Chester

Pandemic has exposed challenges to care for those 65 and older

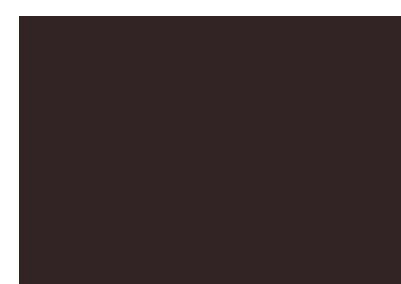
A YEAR LIKE NO OTHER

By **Lisa Scheid**
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@LisaScheid on Twitter

Laptops and translators. That's what a team of Alvernia University professors and students needed to help a group of low-income seniors get through the pandemic isolation. For months, the team had been planning an in-person initiative to help the seniors maintain their health. The plan, said Dr. Robin Zappin, assistant professor of physical therapy, was to bring in nursing and occupational and physical therapy students to a couple of Reading Housing Authority facilities to assess seniors' health and educate them on how to stay well. Mobility is a key to independence as you age, and that was a big part of the initiative. As the pandemic took hold in March 2020 and officials rushed to prevent the spread of the deadly virus, the lively common areas of

senior housing were shuttered. The Alvernia initiative faced the challenge of forging ahead, somehow. Even if the seniors did not catch COVID-19, the Alvernia team feared their health would deteriorate. Relegated to their small apartments, the seniors avoided doctor appointments and found themselves more vulnerable to falls. Without the relationships cultivated in the common areas, the team worried some seniors would have cognitive declines. Hospitals, medical practices and even insurers quickly turned to telehealth. To pivot to telehealth, you need technology. These seniors had no smartphones or laptops. Lack of equipment and broadband access for low-income seniors has been known for years but the need became acute during the pandemic. Also, three-quarters of the seniors spoke primarily Spanish. Lack of technology is one of the problems the pandemic has laid bare in caring for Berks County's seniors, say those who work with them. Seniors, those 65 and older, are a diverse group economically, racially and ethnically. Latinos are a growing segment of the senior population in Berks. The pandemic, with its epicenter in long-term care facilities, also pulled into focus the lack of funding and staffing. Monica Reyes, Berks County Community Foundation health and human services officer, said there were three areas where response fell short for seniors in long-term care.

CALL » PAGE 2



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IN A TIME OF UNCERTAINTY, CHOOSE STABILITY, CHOOSE RELIABILITY, CHOOSE RIDDLE VILLAGE.

Call

FROM PAGE C1

She said lack of testing, lack of personal protective equipment and lack of coordination for rapid response with hospitals to provide assistance to nursing homes were main issues for seniors in nursing homes.

On March 15, the foundation issued a report examining Berks County's response to the pandemic. Among the eight recommendations is a call to include a review of technology infrastructure in strategic planning process of the county and in Reading.

The report, which laid out a plan to study creation of county health department, also called for the Berks County COVID-19 Advisory Panel or a community advisory panel to provide guidelines and recommendations regarding anticipated health care concerns caused by the pandemic.

The report noted that Harvard School of Public Health and Mayo Clinic studies suggest that there will be an onslaught of health problems as a result of the pandemic.

Research needs to be conducted on the effects of the pandemic in the community. Health and social issues of priority should be mental health, housing, food insecurity, school performance, and the long-term effects on COVID survivors.

There is much work ahead, say advocates. But the recovery comes with the opportunity to address issues that had long been smoldering in senior care before the pandemic, some say.

Left behind

The data of deaths from COVID paint part of the picture.

According to a Reading Eagle analysis of data from the Berks County coroner's office, half of all COVID deaths were people over the age 65 who lived in long-term care facilities such as nursing homes or assisted-living.

Long-term care has been at the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, said Zach Shamberg, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Health Care Association.

"We have called for the prioritization of long-term care in the pandemic response and we must remain vigilant to ensure that prioritization becomes a reality moving forward," he said in a news conference in early March. "Anything less for the third-oldest state in the entire country is unacceptable."

The news conference looked back at the impact of the pandemic on long-term care, including personal protective equipment shortages, the workforce and staffing crisis, testing accessibility and visitation.

Shamberg and Mark Parkinson, president and CEO of American Health Care Association and National Center for Assisted Living called for change.



COURTESY OF THE HIGHLANDS OF WYOMISSING

Diane Stevenson chats by phone with her mother, Elma Koskowski, a resident of the personal care unit of The Highlands of Wyomissing late in March 2020. Residents of senior living and care facilities quickly became isolated when the pandemic hit and their well-being quickly became a cause of concern.



MEDIANEWSGROUP

Shannon Flemming spends a minute talking to Dennis Herzog after shopping for and delivering groceries to him as part of the NE Berks Relief Collaborative in early April 2020. Seniors were isolated for their own protection but could have used more help in coping with that alone time.

The nursing home industry in the United States is facing an estimated \$94 billion projected loss as a result of the pandemic, Shamberg and Parkinson said. According to an analysis by their groups, thousands of facilities may close in 2021 due to costs associated with COVID and a loss of revenue.

Parkinson said that after it was understood how the virus spread asymptotically, policy mistakes were made, particularly not prioritizing seniors in long-term care.

"We were not made a priority," he said. "Our residents were not made a priority. There were very limited amounts of tests available and they weren't coming to long-term care. There was a limited supply of PPE and it wasn't coming to long-term care."

He said the consequences speak for themselves. Thousands, possibly tens of thousands of people, died who did not need to die.

Prioritizing the elderly in long-term care for vaccines has made a difference and saved lives, Parkinson and Shamberg said. New residents and new workers should continue to be given a priority.

In Pennsylvania, nursing homes, assisted-living communities and personal care homes collectively spent \$96.2 million per week for

personal protective equipment in 2020.

One-time testing for every worker and resident cost approximately \$30 million collectively each week during the early months of the pandemic. Long-term care providers in Pennsylvania are projected to spend approximately \$2.7 billion collectively in 2020 and 2021 on costs relative to COVID.

"Our aging population continues to grow rapidly," Shamberg said. "Long-term care is well overdue to receive proper Medicaid funding, as the pandemic exacerbated the existing financial problems. Without the necessary funding, the care of tens of thousands of Pennsylvania's seniors will be in jeopardy."

Shamberg said the industry's staffing crisis needs solutions. He pointed to the temporary nurse aide program as an example of innovation. The state gave emergency certification to aides hired during the COVID crisis. The desire is to see the temporary aides become certified nursing assistants.

Parkinson said another lesson from the pandemic is that public health should not be politicized.

"Let's try to somehow make sure that public health is not politicized in the future," Parkinson said. "There's no reason why a pandemic should have de-

veloped into a political fight between red states and blue states, between liberal people and conservative people. The virus doesn't really care so we just need to somehow de-politicize public health because I think the politicization of COVID has had tragic consequences."

Shamberg said the pandemic has given a bullhorn to advocates to talk about existing challenges with funding and staffing. Given the aging of baby boomers, the challenges will only grow.

'Demand change'

State Sen. Judy Schwank said the pandemic has revealed where gaps in care are.

"I do think this has been a real wake-up call for elected officials," said Schwank, who is a member of the Senate Aging and Youth Committee.

"Government can't be the answer to everything but there is so much we haven't been paying attention to," Schwank said.

Schwank said she has heard the desperation from seniors without smartphones or computers as they seek a COVID vaccine. Without the technology they could not access vaccine appointments. Even phone calls didn't help.

"Not even getting anybody to answer a phone is very frustrating," she said.



COURTESY OF THE HIGHLANDS OF WYOMISSING

The Rev. Marvin Dewalt visits his wife, Gloria, via video chat late in March 2020. The couple were in separate care units at The Highlands of Wyomissing, and were under isolation. Many seniors lack technology skills and there was a rush to get them up to speed as the pandemic unfolded and personal interaction dwindled to a minimum.

Schwank said it has been frustrating to get that need across to departments responsible for planning vaccine distribution.

"I get a sense sometimes when dealing with health care or technology, if you're older you are kind of ignored," she said. "Your needs aren't thought of or accommodated."

As baby boomers get older the situation may change, she said.

"I think this is a demanding audience that might demand change in terms of services and in terms of how the business community responds to the needs of older adults," she said.

She noted that businesses already have adapted through COVID with curbside pickup and delivery services.

Caregivers in nursing homes or in private homes are "woefully underpaid for they have to do," Schwank said.

She said the staffing crisis in nursing homes was brought to the forefront during the pandemic. Paid slightly above minimum wage, many caregivers work part-time at multiple jobs, she said.

Schwank, who has followed the issue for years, said increased funding for facilities should go to salaries rather than directly to a facility's general fund.

She said she's looking at how more at-home care can be supported, as well.

Improvising solutions

At the Reading Housing Authority, Alvernia students improvised to connect the seniors.

With the donation of 10 laptops in May, students took their wellness expertise to the seniors through telehealth and ingenuity.

One student set up the computer in the common area so seniors could work with the team virtually.

The virtual visits had to be coordinated with translators who were volunteers

from the university.

Dr. Mary Ann Durant, assistant professor of nursing, and Dr. Marcia Thompson, assistant professor of physical therapy, said they discovered that between March and May in 2020 the seniors were getting very inactive.

Students found seniors uninformed and misinformed about COVID and safety precautions.

Durant said the seniors wanted to know more and be involved.

Durant said telehealth is a change in health care that could better meet the needs of seniors, if they can get access.

Durant said in general the public rallied around seniors during the pandemic with all kinds of groups stepping up to bring them food.

What is next?

Durant said families that took long-term care for granted will likely become more involved.

Thompson said the issue of access to loved ones during the pandemic may influence family decisions about whether a senior can be cared for at home.

Many families are still grieving, Thompson said.

They need support. It's just the start of the mental health issues experts say will need to be addressed through and after the pandemic. Depression is another.

"They haven't had the time to actually grieve so that's going to be something that will be needed," Durant said.

The Alvernia initiative has had ripple effects for mental health.

"Giving someone accurate information is one of the biggest steps you can take," said senior Sarah Bystrycki, a physical therapy major who participates in the initiative. "The information helps calm anxiety so a person can work on healing."

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HEALTH

Dermatologists to hold skin cancer screenings



COURTESY OF PENNSYLVANIA DERMATOLOGY PARTNERS

Cassandra Baier is a physician assistant at the Pottstown office of Pennsylvania Dermatology Partners.

Pennsylvania Dermatology Partners

Pennsylvania Dermatology Partners' teams in the King of Prussia and Pottstown offices will be holding free SPOTme skin cancer screenings to new patients during the months of April and May.

"Skin cancer is the most common cancer in the United States, and it is estimated that one person dies from melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer, every hour," said Dr. Olga Radkevich-Brown of the King of Prussia office. "Yet not only is skin cancer preventable, it's highly treatable when detected early."

Pennsylvania Dermatology Partners is dedicated to educating the public and raising awareness around the important role that annual skin exams play in early detection and optimal treatment of skin cancer.



COURTESY OF PENNSYLVANIA DERMATOLOGY PARTNERS

Dr. Olga Radkevich-Brown

"Unlike other cancers, skin cancer can be seen on the surface of your skin, making it critical to regularly check your skin for changing or suspicious spots," said Physician Assistant Cassandra Baier of the Pottstown location. "A skin cancer screening from a dermatology provider is a visual exam that is painless, only takes a few minutes, and could save your life."

Pennsylvania Dermatology Partners has joined the American Academy of Dermatology's efforts to educate the public about the importance of an annual skin exam and how to do self-examinations at home.

In honor of Skin Cancer Awareness month, they will be offering free skin cancer screenings by appointment only to new patients at participating locations this spring.

The SPOTme skin cancer screening program is part of the American Academy of Dermatology's SPOT Skin Cancer initiative, a campaign to create a world without skin cancer through public awareness, community outreach programs and services and advocacy that promote the prevention, detection and treatment of skin cancer.

Since 1985, AAD member dermatologists have conducted more than 2.4 million free skin cancer screenings and have de-

tected nearly 248,000 suspicious lesions, including more than 27,500 suspected melanomas.

If you're a new patient interested in scheduling your free skin cancer screening at Pennsylvania Dermatology Partners, call 888-895-3376 to schedule an appointment.

About Pennsylvania Dermatology Partners: Pennsylvania Dermatology Partners (PDP) is the region's fastest growing dermatology practice with 23 Pennsylvania and Delaware locations. Since 2012, PDP has been dedicated to providing exceptional and leading-edge dermatology services to patients with its growing and talented team of medical practitioners. PDP specializes in the detection and treatment of skin cancers and treat a full spectrum of diseases of the skin, hair, and nails. For more information, visit www.padermpartners.com or call 888-895-3376.

HEALTH

7 strategies to help prevent cancer

Metro Creative

Cancer affects people from all walks of life. The National Cancer Institute estimated that, in 2020, roughly 1.9 million new cases of cancer would be diagnosed and more than 606,000 people would die from the disease.

The most common cancers include breast, lung, prostate, colon, melanoma and bladder cancers. Even the healthiest people are not immune to these diseases. However, there are ways for people to reduce their risk for various cancers.

1. SKIP TOBACCO PRODUCTS » Avoiding tobacco in all forms can greatly reduce a person's risk of de-

veloping cancer. Smoking is a major contributor to various cancers, including lung and bladder cancers.

2. EXERCISE REGULARLY » Exercise benefits the body in various ways, including reducing a person's risk for various types of cancers. The American Institute for Cancer Research recommends exercising for at least 45 minutes per day. This doesn't have to mean a hard workout at the gym. Moderate exercise through gardening, dancing, playing with children, or walking the dog are sufficient forms of exercise.

3. LOSE WEIGHT IN A HEALTHY WAY » The American Cancer Society says obesity and being over-

weight have been linked to increased risk for breast, colon, esophageal, endometrial and pancreatic cancers. Fat and sugar metabolism may be mechanisms implicating weight in cancer occurrence. Skip the fad diets and lose weight through portion control, a balance of healthy foods and exercise.

4. LIMIT ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION » Excessive alcohol consumption increases the risk of cancers to the breast, esophagus, mouth and larynx. Harvard Medical School recommends that those who choose to drink limit alcohol their consumption to no more than one drink per day.

5. REDUCE CONSUMPTION

OF ANIMAL FATS » Verywell Health notes that studies point to a diet high in animal fat as a contributor to increased risk of certain cancers. Red meat is a particular concern.

6. AVOID RADIATION EXPOSURE » Opt for medical imaging tests only when they are absolutely necessary. Radon in a home is a factor in cancer causation, so homeowners should periodically test their homes for radon. In addition, sunscreen and avoiding the sun during certain times of day, such as between the hours of 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., can reduce exposure to potentially harmful UV rays.

7. PRIORITIZE SAFE BEHAVIORS » Certain viruses



METRO

Healthy foods that are rich in vegetables and low in animal fats can help people reduce their cancer risk.

can cause cancer, including Epstein-Barr and human papillomavirus. Hepatitis and HIV also can increase a person's risk for cancer. Practicing safe sex and avoiding illegal drug use can lower the risk of getting cancer from infec-

tious diseases.

Cancer continues to be a leading cause of death and affects millions of people. By examining their behaviors and lifestyles, people can make changes that reduce their risk for various cancers.



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THE GREAT OUTDOORS



BEN HASTY — MEDIANEWSGROUP

People walk on the Union Canal Bicycle and Walking trail at the Berks County Heritage Center in Bern Township.

Spring has sprung, and it's time to get outside and enjoy it.

By Lisa Scheid
 lscheid@readingeagle.com
 @LisaScheid on Twitter

If the warmer weather has you itching to get outdoors, here are five places where you can go for a

healthy springtime stroll, and maybe take in some of the bounty of history, wildflowers, wildlife and scenic views that Berks County has to offer:

Union Canal Towpath

Berks County Parks Department's 4.2 mile trail takes you from city of Reading to Bern and Spring townships. It was built in sections through the 1970s. Steeped in history,

the level paths and shade from trees make for an easy walk or leisurely ride. There are benches along the trail. Read more about it at: <https://bit.ly/3mkh9Ep>

You can find an audio tour and a brochure about the history here: <https://izi.travel/en/6b6e-union-canal-bicycle-walking-trail/en>

Hunsickers Grove

This former Berks County park is now owned

by Longswamp Township. The 48-acre gem features a trail around a quarry pond. The trail is hilly in parts. There's a pier and pavilion to enjoy the serene beauty of the pond.

In a 20- to 30-minute walk you can see spring wildflowers, find ferns and mosses, and clubmosses, which are relative of ferns.

The wildlife is interesting and varied for patient observers. Red-bellied and

downy woodpeckers can be heard. Trout, bass and crappie can be caught in the lake, which had been the site of fishing rodeos for children until last year. Sometimes geese and ducks can be spotted. To learn more about Hunsicker's Grove go to: <https://bit.ly/3mjH1jC>

Monocacy Hill

With 6 miles of trail and a beautiful vistas, there's a

lot to take in at Monocacy Hill in Amity Township. It is owned by the township and managed by volunteers from the Monocacy Hill Conservation Association. They provide materials for self-guided wildflower walks or you can look up when a guided one is scheduled at <https://bit.ly/2Pt42VD>.

The park has a wide variety of plant life. More than

OUTDOORS » PAGE 5



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Flowers bloom in a small garden along the side of the Muhlenberg Rail Trail.



A walkway setup on the lower trail for when the trail gets swampy.



BEN HASTY — MEDIA NEWS GROUP

The view from the top of the Monocacy Hill Trail at the Monocacy Hill Recreation Area in Amity Township.

Outdoors

FROM PAGE C4

170 species of herbaceous plants, 65 species of trees and shrubs and 17 species of ferns and related plants have been identified. Two of the park's plant species are on the Pennsylvania Natural Diversity Inventory as Plants of Special Concern.

To learn more about Monocacy Hill go to: <https://bit.ly/3ww0uIM>

Muhlenberg Rail Trail

This asphalt trail is maintained by Muhlenberg Township, including parts that are in Laureldale borough.

The trail is a fairly

straight, almost 2-mile path from the village of Temple to Laureldale.

The macadam pathway is a 12-foot-wide and accommodates walkers, runners, bikes and wheelchairs and baby carriages. Bring Fido. com gives it a five-bone rating for its dog-friendliness. Keep your dog leashed, though. For more about this trail go to: <https://bit.ly/3wsXR4e>

Green Hills Preserve

The 201-acre preserve is a mix of fields, woodlands and wetlands. A tributary to the Allegheny Creek, a state-designated cold water fishery, bisects the preserve.

There is a red maple listed on the official list of Pennsylvania Big Trees. It's



The pond at Hunsicker's Grove, a park in Longswamp Township.

not far from an old stone spring house, which is fed by the cool, clear springs there. There are a variety of trails ranging from easy to moderate slopes with scenic

lookouts as well as a gazebo. The longest trail is about 1.4 miles.

A favorite for birders, the preserve is listed among Berks County's top

20 hotspots on ebird, an online database of bird observations from enthusiasts and scientists. Popular birds spotted include kestrels, wood thrushes and

field sparrows. Birdwatchers have recorded 145 species at the Preserve.

For more details about the preserve go to: <https://bit.ly/39J6oXa>

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RETIREMENT INDUSTRY

How Pennsylvania's underfunded senior care facilities impact you

By Andrew Kulp
akulp@readingeagle.com
@Kulpwrit on Twitter

Not only did COVID-19 take a very human toll on senior care facilities, with its residents generally the most at-risk of experiencing serious complications from the disease, the coronavirus also exposed the unsustainable financial situation facing the industry at large — one likely to have a direct impact on the care either you or a loved one will receive.

“What we have seen over the past 12 months is the COVID-19 pandemic both exacerbated and amplified the existing issues for long-term care providers,” said Zack Shamberg, president and CEO of the Pennsylvania Health Care Association.

“And not just nursing homes, but personal care homes and assisted living communities as well.”

Senior care providers were slammed with new, unanticipated costs such as testing, PPE and “hero pay” amid the pandemic, leaving many in the business to strive for success in long-term care while contemplating their own survival.

Yet, budget shortfalls and underfunded facilities are nothing new, remarked Shamberg, head of the state’s leading advocacy group for residents and their care providers. And, if current trends hold, the system may not be able to bend anymore — it will break.

“Right now, we are seeing an extremely volatile long-term care industry in Penn-



COURTESY OF THE PENNSYLVANIA HEALTH CARE ASSOCIATION

The way senior care staff have battled through underfunding to do their jobs, especially during a pandemic, is a reason for optimism according to Zack Shamberg of the Pennsylvania Health Care Association.

sylvania,” Shamberg said. “We’ve seen reorganizations. We’ve seen changes of ownership. We’ve seen sales.”

“The next step is closures, and in the third-oldest state in the entire country, we can’t afford to have long-term care facilities shut their doors.”

The economics of care

The PHCA has been preaching about about the

challenges facing the industry for some time now, with Shamberg able to distill those down to three major points of emphasis.

“For the better part of the last decade, we’ve warned of a Medicaid crisis, that Medicaid hasn’t kept up with medical costs,” Shamberg said. “We’ve warned of a workforce shortage, and we’ve warned of the legal climate allowing attorneys

to run rampant and drive care providers out of PA.”

Medicaid lies at the heart of the matter. At the program’s current level of funding, there is a daily budget shortfall of almost \$50 for every resident, creating an obvious strain on providers.

And that lack of funding doesn’t strictly pertain to the care seniors are receiving. It’s partly to blame for staffing shortages in facilities as well, as it impacts both their ability to recruit and retain employees.

“For more than 70% of all care provided, long-term care providers rely on the state’s Medicaid program to reimburse,” Shamberg said. “And there’s a direct correlation to recruitment in care facilities and investments in buildings and technology.”

“When Medicare doesn’t keep up with medical costs, which rise on average 2% every year, that means cuts or scaling back everyday operations is inevitable.”

How the crisis could affect you

Shamberg said we’re already seeing the impact of the lack of investment in Medicaid and how it’s strained facilities.

If it continues and facilities begin to close up shop, it might result in the inability of many care providers to exist in the state.”

“In five, 10, 20 years, it means family members will be traveling hours in some cases to see their loved ones,” Shamberg said.

It could also wind up having a direct impact on your own care, too.

The PHCA cites a Center for Rural Pennsylvania report that estimates, by 2030, the number of people in the state ages 60 and older will rise to 3.9 million. In the 2019 census, 2.4 million Pennsylvania residents identified as 65 and older.

While people may not like to consider the possibility they could wind up in a senior care facility, the fact is the population is aging.

“I think everybody would prefer to be cared for at home,” Shamberg said. “However, that’s not reality.”

Steps in the right direction?

Shamberg noted there have been some positive legislative developments at the state level more recently. A bill passed at the height of the COVID crisis allowed facilities to utilize temporary nursing aides who can perform limited functions after completing an eight-hour course online and some hands-on training.

The PHCA’s hope is more legislation follows so that the scope and types of training evolve and make

entering careers in senior care more accessible.

“We don’t have enough workers to care for our population moving forward,” Shamberg said. “We as a state need to ensure we continue to build that workforce pipeline.”

Another bill that passed in the state House would grant senior care providers and other businesses some liability protection.

“If enacted, this will essentially provide long-term care providers, facilities, workers and residents the protections they need against opportunistic lawsuits just seeking to profit from COVID-19,” Shamberg said, adding the uptick in litigation has helped push some in the industry to the brink.

What gives Shamberg the greatest reason for optimism of all though is simply the way senior care staff have battled through underfunding to do their jobs, especially during a pandemic.

It’s exactly the resilient mentality workers are going to need moving forward if things don’t dramatically change.

“What gives us hope is what we’ve seen on the front lines throughout the past year,” Shamberg said. “That even in the face of every challenge and every adversity and being at the epicenter of this pandemic, we have seen our health care heroes step up.”



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THANKS FOR SERVICE

WORLD WAR II VETERAN GETS TRIBUTE HE DESERVES

By Lisa Scheid
lscheid@readingeagle.com
@LisaScheid on Twitter

Walter LaSota Jr.'s six great-grandchildren waved American flags as the Marine Corps Hymn played from a cellphone through a portable speaker.

They had come to the Muhlenberg Township municipal building to honor their dziadek (Polish for grandfather) for his service in World War II and its aftermath, service that until recently LaSota, 95, rarely spoke about. He served from May 1, 1944, to April 19, 1946.

The children made cards and posters to honor his service. They also wore T-shirts that said: "We love our Marine. He is our Dziadek."

LaSota of Reading had come to the township building on Saturday expecting a celebration for his son Walter S., who has been a Muhlenberg planning commission member for 40 years. Instead, the elder LaSota was greeted by nearly two dozen family members along with presentations from Monsignor Edward Domin and Sgt Maj. Rocco DeCamillo honoring his military service.

LaSota's son said his four children had long recognized and appreciated their father for his mentorship, assistance, and guidance when they celebrated his birthday, on Father's Day and at Christmas. But as they got older they had never formally recognized the sacrifices he had made. That's why they held the gathering on Saturday.

Domin prayed for blessings and thanked LaSota for his service to his family and country. Domin is pastor of LaSota's church, St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Reading, and St. Catharine of Siena in Exeter Township. He noted that LaSota was wearing the same hat he wears to church every Sunday. The baseball style cap says "6th Marine Division, WWII."

DeCamillo, a Marine Corps reservist and Exeter police officer, spoke about the battle of Okinawa, which was the largest amphibious assault in the Pacific Theater of World War II. It would take three months for the U.S. to control the Japanese island. At the end of the battle 7,373 Marines, sailors and soldiers had lost their lives. About 32,000 were wounded.

LaSota fought in the battle of Sugar Loaf Hill, which has been called one of the toughest fights of the bloodiest battles fought in the Pacific Theater. The 1st and 6th Marine Divisions fought for the hill. LaSota received two Purple Hearts. One was for shrapnel injuries to his back and legs and the second for a bullet wound to his forearm. He served in the 6th Marine Division, which was disbanded at the end of the battle due to the number of casualties, according to his son Walter. He served in the 22nd Marine regiment.

After his first injury he spent about 10 days in the hospital and then returned to the battle.



READING EAGLE: LISA SCHEID
Sophia Jones and her mother, Maria Jones, share a poster honoring Maria's grandfather and Sophia's great-grandfather Walter LaSota Jr., a World War II veteran who was honored Saturday in Muhlenberg Township.



READING EAGLE: LISA SCHEID
Marine Corps veteran Walter LaSota Jr., 95, of Reading, prays with Monsignor Edward Domin during a ceremony Saturday honoring LaSota's military service.



READING EAGLE: LISA SCHEID
Marine Corps Sgt. Major Rocco DeCamillo honors Walter LaSota, 95, for his service on Okinawa during World War II.

"The fact that you stayed in the battle after you were wounded the first time, stuck around long enough to be wounded a second time, that says a lot about your service and sacrifice," DeCamillo said. DeCamillo asked LaSota if he knew that his unit was recognized with an official presidential citation in 1948. LaSota did not. DeCamillo read that citation.

LaSota and his late wife, Dorothy, were owner-operators of Eng's Laundry and the Oriental Gift House on South Fifth Street in Reading. He was born in Scranton but moved, eventually attending the former Conshohocken High School. He never graduated because he enlisted. He was just 18 when he went to war. The LaSotas lived in the 400

block of Chestnut Street in Reading for many years. After his great-grandchildren presented their posters, LaSota chatted with family and DeCamillo. He said he has always wondered what happened to the buddy beside him when he was hit in Okinawa. He doesn't remember the guy's name but recalls that his buddy, who was an

assistant handling ammunition, was throwing Japanese grenades out of their fox hole. When LaSota was hit and taken to the hospital he never found out what happened to the other man. He said he was proud to have fought in the war but wouldn't want to go through it again. "Cause it is hell," he said. "It is hell."

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READING EAGLE: LISA SCHEID
Walter LaSota Jr.'s great-grandchildren wave flags during a Saturday event inside Muhlenberg Township building to honor LaSota's service in World War II.

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CELEBRATIONS

Heritage of Green Hills serves up homemade comfort on PB&J Day

Heritage of Green Hills

The Heritage of Green Hills, a healthy lifeplan community in Cumru Township, Berks County, threw a pop-up party in honor of National Peanut Butter and Jelly Day.

“We’ve begun surprising residents now and then with unannounced parties,” says Well by Design Director Cheryl Anderson. “While it’s nice to have something fun to look forward to, it’s also great to have a fun surprise just pop up!”

In keeping with the theme, Anderson made four king-sized loaves worth of PB&J sandwiches at home and brought them in. “Of course they’re home-



COURTESY OF THE HERITAGE OF GREEN HILLS

Above: Heritage of Green Hills resident Connie Corter enjoys a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Right: Dan Ferst and MacKenzie Carbone, members of the food and beverage team at the Heritage of Green Hills, sport peanut butter and jelly outfits.



made,” she said, laughing. “The whole point of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich is that is homemade! It’s an expression of love, whether it’s a parent packing up a sandwich for a child or a friend serving up a tasty bit of nostalgia for a friend. PB&J’s just fill you with comfort.”

At the pop-up party — which was held on the official National Peanut Butter and Jelly Day, April 21 — residents gathered over sandwiches, talked about the Phillies and filled in new community members on what types of trips and outings they can look forward to now that they’ve received both doses of the COVID-19 vaccine and the world is expected to open up later in 2021.

Activities abound at SageLife senior living communities



COURTESY OF SAGELIFE

A new skee-ball machine has arrived at Echo Lake, a senior living community in Tredyffrin Township, Chester County. Residents, including Shirley Ganly, are having fun with the Boardwalk classic and looking forward to competing with family and friends as the SageLife community carefully opens up its guest protocols.



COURTESY OF SAGELIFE

Jeanette Foreman, foreground, and Mary Lou Levinson enjoy an indoor game of pickleball at Echo Lake in Tredyffrin Township, Chester County. Residents of SageLife’s innovative senior living community are playing the game indoors for now, but look forward to taking the competition outside as the weather warms up.



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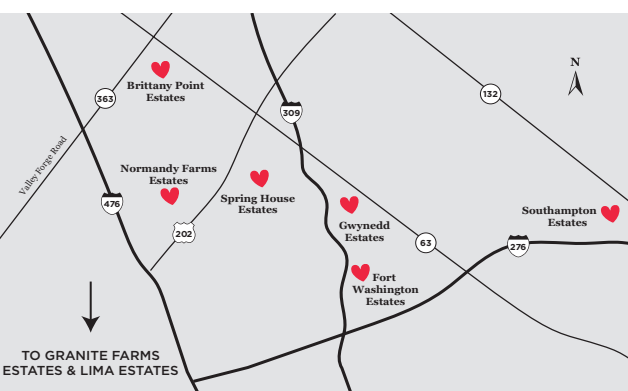
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Spot of T

KINDNESS ALWAYS BEGETS KINDNESS

By Terry Alburger

One of my favorite comedy films is the classic “Three Amigos.” It follows an unlike trio of would-be heroes into Mexico, where they have to save a poor village from vicious pillagers and banditos. In the end, they vanquish the enemy, and as they are sitting on their horses getting ready to bid the fine villagers adieu, the village patriarch tosses a small bag of gold to them, saying “It is all we have.” The trio exchanges glances and tosses it back to them saying, “Our reward is that justice is done!” Yes, it is a fictitious com-

edy, but there is a great lesson in that scene. Kindness is not a task that one performs for personal gain. Kindness is doing the right thing for the right reason. And when you offer kindness to someone else, good things happen, both to giver and receiver. There is no stronger magnet than kindness. Kindness attracts kindness. If you smile at someone on the sidewalk, chances are they will smile back, making you feel good. If someone lets you into a long line of traffic, you smile and wave, appreciative of their kindness. And if someone goes out of their way to open a door for you, especially if you are laden

with packages, you are filled with gratitude. It’s a good feeling, isn’t it? But it doesn’t end there. At this point, you, as the recipient of a random act of kindness, are inclined to pass that spirit along. The string of kindness lives on in yet another kindness. It’s a chain reaction of positivity. A good friend recently shared a heartwarming story with me. She is a very generous soul and always goes way above and beyond to help anyone in need. She met an elderly couple who had no family. She ended up helping them in so many ways, going over on weekends and evenings, cleaning, organizing, do-

How you treat another living being says a lot about you. Be it human, canine, feline, etc., a gentle touch, a soft-spoken word, a hug, a snuggle, goes a long way.

ing whatever they needed. There was no selfish reason for helping them, no payment expected, just the feeling that it was the right thing to do. Fast forward to months later, after they had both passed away, when she was notified that this couple had left her an education fund for her young daughter! It was totally unexpected and such a nice gesture by this couple, and a gift that will live on in the hearts of my friend and her daughter ... that is what kindness begets. More kindness. Driving to work this morning, I witnessed such a simple act of kindness, but it filled my heart. I was stopped at a red light

next to someone’s home. The “dad” was sitting on the back porch, looking at his phone with one hand. One step down, between his knees, sat his dog, happily watching the world go by. The man’s other hand was caressing the pup’s head. At one point, he stopped and bent over to kiss the dog’s head, and the dog nuzzled him back. It just made me smile. How you treat another living being says a lot about you. Be it human, canine, feline, etc., a gentle touch, a soft-spoken word, a hug, a snuggle, goes a long way. Kindness wins. Every time. Kindness always begets kindness.



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COVID-19 VACCINES

PA Department of Aging can assist with appointments

MediaNews Group

The Pennsylvania Department of Aging continues to encourage older adults seeking a COVID-19 vaccine appointment to contact their local Area Agency on Aging (AAA) for any assistance they may need in scheduling one.

The AAAs have been working with vaccine providers to arrange appointments for older adults eligible in Phase 1A of the commonwealth's vaccine plan

after the Department of Health issued an amended order in March.

"Even though the Department of Health recently ramped up its timetable for all Pennsylvanians 16 and older to receive vaccinations, we continue to focus on our mission to get older adults their vaccines with AAAs assisting seniors as much as possible with navigating the vaccination process," said Secretary of Aging Robert Torres. "While we've seen real

progress in getting older adults the vaccines they need, more older adults need assistance. Any senior who needs help should not hesitate to reach out to their local AAA."

In addition to working with vaccine providers to schedule appointments for older adults, AAAs may be able to help with arranging transportation if that is needed. Shared ride programs are available in every county and fixed-route transportation systems

statewide offer accessible transportation.

Older adults can use these services for assistance in getting to mass vaccination sites and any site where a vaccine is available to individuals, including pharmacies, hospitals and doctor's offices. Free transportation to vaccinations may also be available for qualifying seniors.

The department is offering resources and guidance to help educate and protect older adults who

are still looking to schedule their COVID-19 vaccine appointment. The following resources can be downloaded in English and Spanish from the Department of Aging's website, www.aging.pa.gov:

Frequently asked questions about the COVID-19 vaccines
Protecting older adults from COVID-19-related scams

Clearing up misconceptions about the COVID-19 vaccine

General information on COVID-19 for older adults

Here is the phone number list for the local AAAs:
Berks County: 610-478-6500
Bucks County: 267-880-5700
Chester County: 610-344-6350
Delaware County: 610-490-1300
Montgomery County: 610-278-3601
Philadelphia County: 215-765-9000

FAMILIES

'A moving moment'

Grandma prescribed a post-vaccine hug

By Vanessa Alvarez
The Associated Press

NEW YORK » For Laura Shaw Frank, seeing her mother hug her daughter for the first time since the onset of the pandemic was a light at the end of the tunnel.

"It just felt like all this love was pouring out and also that there was like this feeling of hope, like maybe there's a future, maybe we're going to get out of this," Frank said about her mother and daughter embracing for the first time after being vaccinated.

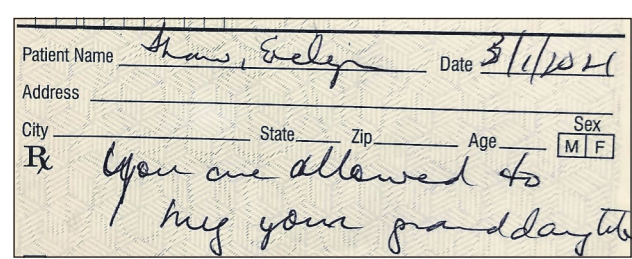
Evelyn Shaw, who lives about a mile from Frank's home in the Bronx and lives alone, spent a lot of time with her four grandchildren before the pandemic. She moved there four years ago to be closer to them. But when it hit, the family made the difficult decision to stay as distant as possible in order to keep her safe.

It was a note from the family doctor that cleared Shaw to hug her 23-year-old granddaughter Ateret once they had been fully vaccinated.

"We were all just bawling," Frank told The Associated Press. "She hadn't been touched in a year. It was such a moving moment."

Frank said coming together as a family during religious holidays is the next challenge. After that, the family dreams of Broadway — but only if her mother will be safe.

"We feel very comfortable, given the guidance that we've gotten, that we can have our Seder together in a week and a half, but I do really understand my mom ... I really do get it. She's at much higher risk than we are, and it takes a while," Frank said. "It takes a while to sort of let go of that fear and return to some sense of normalcy."



COURTESY OF LAURA SHAW FRANK

A portion of a prescription for a hug, written for Evelyn Shaw of the Bronx borough of New York by her doctor.



COURTESY OF LAURA SHAW FRANK

Evelyn Shaw hugs her granddaughter Ateret Frank in the Bronx borough of New York. After a year without touch, a family doctor cleared Shaw for hugs as a prescription once she and her 23-year-old granddaughter received full doses of the COVID-19 vaccine.

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IN REMEMBRANCE

The face of funnel cakes

'QUEEN OF FUNNEL CAKES' ALICE REINERT DIES AT 96

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

Using her husband's \$96 vacation check, Alice M. Reinert opened a funnel cake stand at the Reading Fair in 1965 and launched a legend.

Over the next 26 years, "Dutchie" Alice would become the face of funnel cakes on the Pennsylvania county fair circuit and beyond.

Reinert, the self-described "Queen of Funnel Cakes," died April 2 at age 96 in the home of her daughter, Mary Berger, in Blandon.

Berger recalled how the family would ride the fair circuit in summers, making funnel cakes in cast iron pans for hours on end.

"Making funnel cakes was a tough, hot business," Berger said. "But what kept mom going was how much she enjoyed meeting people."

A born promoter, Alice beckoned customers on the midway with slogans like "Get your Dutch funnel cakes here" and "Get in touch with the Dutch."

For sure, Alice was not the first to make funnel cakes.

But she popularized the doughy wafflelike delicacies in demonstrations at Gimbel's department store and on Philadelphia TV channels with personalities Sally Starr and Captain Noah.

In a 2010 interview with the Reading Eagle, while shying away from being called a feminist, Alice claimed to have been the first woman to own a stand on the midway of county fairs throughout the region. "She was a driven woman in a man's world," said Larry Kressler, who worked



Alice M. Reinert, the unofficial "Queen of Funnel Cakes," operated stands on midways at county fairs for 26 years before retiring in 1991. She died April 2 at age 96 in Blandon. She is shown in 2010 when she wrote her autobiography "From Pennsylvania Dutch Farm to Queen of Funnel Cakes."

at Alice's stand for several summers. "I was one of five guys her family adopted every year."

They traveled the fair circuit, Kressler recalls, and Alice paid for everything, including haircuts, and sent their paychecks home to their mothers. He considered her his traveling mom, Harlan his traveling dad and Mary and Shirley

his traveling sisters. "Her kindness was amazing. God bless Alice," said Kressler 64, a former Bloomsburg resident who lives in California.

Starting in what she termed a tiny "chicken coop" of a building at the Reading Fair, Alice parlayed a knack for making funnel cakes she learned growing up on a Greenwich

Township farm into a business that had three stands when she retired in 1991. She also operated a stand at the Leesport Farmers Market.

While she enjoyed success in business, her life was not without adversity, which she noted in her 2010 autobiography "From Pennsylvania Dutch Farm to Queen of the Funnel Cakes."

An invalid 12-year-old son, Harlan Reinert Jr., died in 1961. She was his caregiver from birth, and went into business after his death. Her husband, Harlan, was stricken and died at the York County Fair in 1989.

Alice also wrote poetry and songs, and recorded 11 songs on an LP entitled "Alice."

During that 2010 interview in her Blandon home, Alice sang a few lines from "Mama's Little Angel," which she wrote when her son was 8.

"Mama's little angel, daddy's little boy, came to us one day and filled our hearts with joy," she sang, before being overcome by emotion and unable to continue.

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GRANDPARENTS

Grandparents in the pandemic: a lost year, but now some hope



COURTESY OF GEORGE PETERS

The Peters family outdoor socially-distanced Christmas exchange is held on the front lawn at Renee and Dan Schauer's home in Cincinnati on Dec. 23, 2020. From left are the grandchildren of Joe and Nancy Peters: Taylor J. and Oliva Meade in strollers; front row, Jane Matthews, Ben Felblinger, Amelia Hoying, Abby Felblinger, Maggie Hoying and Zach Felblinger; back row, Brad Schauer, Sarah Schauer, Nate Hoying, Ellie Schauer and Grandma Nancy Peters.

By Dan Sewell
The Associated Press

CINCINNATI » No sleepovers with popcorn and Disney movies. No dance recitals or holiday pageants, let alone any Grandparents' Day for visiting the kids' classrooms.

No hugs. The first 12 months of the pandemic represent a lost year for many in the large

group of grandparents in U.S. history. Most of the nation's some 70 million grandparents are in the fourth quarter of their lives, and the clock has kept running.

"Working with older adults, I'm seeing a lot of depression, a lot of increases in loneliness," says Nick Nicholson, a nursing professor and researcher on aging at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, Conn. "It's been

really difficult ... the anxiety, the despair, the social isolation. Over time, there are so many adverse effects. The sooner we expand the bubble, the better, so people can start healing together."

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offered some beginning steps forward for Year 2, saying fully vaccinated grandparents could visit in a single household with healthy

children and grandchildren without masks or other special precautions.

Doris Rolark blew air kisses to her mask-wearing grandchildren and great-grandchildren when they dropped off presents on her 78th birthday last month. She resumed hugs after the CDC guidelines were announced.

"It was great; I'm getting excited to see the rest of them," says the Middletown,

Ohio, woman, who has three grandchildren and 16 great-grandkids. "I hope it's going to be better now."

Joe and Nancy Peters had one of their 11 grandchildren over to visit last week as they began "cautiously returning to normal," he says. Both retired educators in their 70s, they were used to being heavily involved with the grandchildren, all living near them in suburban Cincinnati, be-

fore the pandemic and its safety restrictions hit.

It was especially tough losing time with the youngest.

"They're 3, 4, and 5 years old and a whole year has gone," Nancy Peters says. "They've changed a lot ... and Amelia would say each day to her Mom, 'I am going to have a sleepover at Grandma's when coronavirus is over.'"

HOPE » PAGES 25



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COURTESY OF ARMAN RAMNATH

Arman Ramnath with his grandmother Saroja Seetharaman on Oct. 5, 2016, in Columbus, Ohio.



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Brilee Carter, left, 13, and Cobe Calhoun, 17, share a laugh with their great-grandmother, Doris Rolark, outside Rolark's daughter's home in Monroe, Ohio.

Hope

FROM PAGE D4

“And now she isn't 3 anymore.”

Both Peters and Rolark have been fully vaccinated as the shot pace has picked up nationally in recent weeks, with an estimated 60% of those 65 and older getting at least one dose so far. But the CDC reports that only 10% of the population as a whole has been fully vaccinated and reminds that vulnerability increases with age. The CDC says eight of 10 people who have died in the United States from the virus were 65 or older.

Nicholson says that while some older adults are “just breaking down the door to get out” after a year of isolation, others remain apprehensive with variant strains and other unknowns ahead. “They wonder: Is it safe?” she says.

Prescription: caution

Joaniko Kohchi, who heads the Institute for Parenting at Adelphi University in Garden City, N.Y., says grandparents and other

family members need to be cautious as they try to return to something that passes for normalcy.

“There's going to be unquestionably a period of adjustment that will continue; planning and flexibility is really important,” she says.

Also unknown: how much some older adults have been hurt not only emotionally but mentally by losing in-person contacts and other activity outside their homes for a year.

“I think seeing the same two to three people all time, it can be really tough,” says Arman Ramnath, whose India-born grandmother Vijaya Ramnath, 94, has lived with his parents in Columbus, Ohio, since before he was born. “It kind of ages you faster.”

While many grandparents are keeping in touch by phone, text and video chats, others lack access or ability to use such technology. A study conducted in September and October found resilience among older Americans, but also signs of trouble, with many reporting decreased happiness and some reporting increased loneliness and depression heading into winter.

During good weather, the Peterses had gone on and received a lot of driveway visits, including a driveway one-person dance recital for them by a granddaughter. They went to dozens of outdoor events such as baseball and soccer games last year, but couldn't attend the grandkids' indoor basketball games.

“It's been pretty tough,” says Joe Peters, who recounts gym-hopping Saturdays in previous years when they hit as many as eight kids' basketball games in a day.

Many grandparents actively help out their children by babysitting and school or daycare pickups, so pandemic barriers against that have made for “a lose-lose” situation for families, Nicholson says.

Rolark of Middletown, Ohio, has always been active with the offspring. She raised three children as a divorced single woman, and two of her great-grandchildren lived with her through high school. Her progeny have been paying her back

during the pandemic for all those years of her support when she was also working a full-time office job at a steelmaking company.

“I couldn't have made it without them,” says Rolark, who says great-grandson Amarius Gates kept her driveway shoveled during the winter, while granddaughter Davonne Calhoun and others in her large family have run errands and helped her with house chores.

Households, facilities struggle

Nursing homes and other assisted-care facilities, too, have faced challenges to keep grandparents connected as many cut off contact visits because of concerns about virus spread.

“It's been lonely,” says Deb McGlinch, a patient in Versailles Rehabilitation & Health Center in western Ohio.

She was used to frequent visits from her granddaughter, Kortaney Cattell, 20, to play card games such as

Uno with her. She has been able to do video chats with Kortaney and seven other grandchildren, but has missed their card games. They recently resumed friendly competition at a distance with a virtual slot machine game.

McGlinch says that instead of just trading small talk by phone, now “we can have fun.”

One in 10 U.S. grandparents now live in the same household with at least one grandchild. In some Asian cultures, that has long been common. In Ramnath's family, his India-born maternal grandmother, Saroja Seetharaman, rotates among her three children and their six grandchildren, in Dallas, Atlanta and his Columbus home.

Ramanth, 27, has been nervous about getting near his older grandmother, Vijaya, especially whenever he has just returned from Washington, where he is a Georgetown University Law School student. He is studying remotely but sometimes must visit school such as to

pick up books.

Like the grandparents who lament time lost with their growing grandchildren, grandchildren can feel badly about missed opportunities with their aging loved ones.

Ramanth would have liked to have spent time with her in the past year learning more about the family's history. She once met Mohandas K. Gandhi, India's late famed leader and proponent of nonviolence. She attended a tea hosted by Queen Elizabeth II. And he's seen photos of her late husband, a high-ranking Indian Navy officer, with the late Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

“This is a time when I wish I could talk to her more about her life, as she's getting older,” says Ramanth, who hopes to have more contact soon now that she's been fully vaccinated. “At times it can be kind of sad. You don't get to spend as much time with someone even if they're living with you.”



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