

Tucson families find ways to stay in touch with isolated elders during coronavirus pandemic

by Carmen Duarte / Arizona Daily Star
Kelly Presnell / Arizona Daily Star / photo



Susan Hillman chats on the phone with her mother, Betty Hillman, 85, near a photo of Betty and her late husband. Betty is in long-term care, and Susan is unable to visit because of COVID-19 restrictions. Susan drops off newspapers and chocolates for her mom every day.

As elderly relatives and friends are in lockdown in care facilities as a security measure against the coronavirus pandemic, Tucson families are finding ways to stay connected.

Local care homes have all but banned face-to-face visits to keep the virus at bay. Casual strolls or lively banter across a dining-room table with elderly parents or grandparents have been replaced by internet messaging, computer video chats and waves from outside a window. Some relatives drop off cards and chocolates at the front door of facilities for their loved ones.

For those near death in hospice, compassionate exceptions are made under strict protocols to let those dying have relatives with them when conditions are safe. One local family whose father was dying in a care home was allowed by the facility's owner to visit with him under strict safety

precautions before he passed away. Some end their days alone, but comforted by a priest allowed inside under careful measures.

The following are glimpses into the Tucson lives of those affected by the lockdown, and signs of peace that bring them comfort, tears and even smiles.

HOSPICE CARE

Monsignor Thomas Cahalane, retired pastor of Our Mother of Sorrows Catholic Church, received a telephone call one evening telling him to hurry. He needed to give last rites to a woman at Fairmount Assisted Living and Memory Care on Tucson's east side.

The monsignor was escorted by Mattie Nason, the facility owner, into the facility after making sure he was not sick or had not recently traveled. He did not speak to anyone or touch anything. His temperature was taken and he washed his hands, among the protocols, before he was accompanied into the 96-year-old woman's room.

The woman was a parishioner of the church and volunteered as a receptionist at the office. She was from the Philippines and helped U.S. Army soldiers during World War II by gathering information as a guerrilla. She fell in love with a GI, married and eventually moved to Fort Huachuca. The couple reared three children, and she worked at the fort before retiring decades ago and moving to Tucson. Relatives could not be with the woman because of coronavirus travel restrictions, Nason said.

Now the frail woman had her religious request fulfilled by the monsignor, a friend, who prayed over her, anointing her with oils on her forehead and hands, blessing her and cleansing her soul of sin.

The woman was no longer restless. She was calm in her room that was adorned with photographs of her youth, husband and children. An abalone shell crucifix was on the wall facing her, a statue of the Blessed Mother was near and a rosary was on the nightstand.

"Are you at peace?" Cahalane asked the woman. She replied: "I'm at peace."

"My senses were that she was in the company of the holy ones who had gone on before her and in the companionship of the Lord," said Cahalane.

"10 HOURS OF HEAVEN"

Susan Hillman was her mother's temporary nurse, tending to her needs at an assisted living home before she was recently moved into a skilled long-term-care center in the Catalina Foothills. Her mom broke her hip last year and her mobility has been decreasing ever since, said Hillman, a hospice nurse who understands the strict protocols set in place to protect the elderly in senior communities and health-care facilities.

The daughter visited Betty Hillman every day and began searching for long-term-care centers about six months ago. Then the coronavirus pandemic hit and Susan could no longer be with her 85-year-old mom. Susan called her every day.

Betty could no longer socialize with friends and was restricted to her apartment where she ate her meals and remained isolated.

"She probably was going stir-crazy and would try to get up and walk and would forget that her legs were weak. She fell six times in one week," said Susan. The falls did not require medical attention. Her placement at the long-term-care center occurred soon after the falls, and Susan was allowed to be her mother's nurse before she was transferred to the center.

"It was 10 hours of heaven, just being able to be there with her," said Susan, her voice cracking. "It didn't matter that I wore gloves and a mask. I was able to be in the same room with her for 10 hours. It was fabulous."

Susan packed her mom's clothes, books and mementos into a suitcase. She readied her wheelchair, walker and a few supplies. Betty was born in Oakland and grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area. She met her future husband, Bill, in the sixth grade and told Susan she immediately fell in love with the boy from Kansas. They married in 1957 and Betty taught high school English for one year, eventually deciding to stay home and care for three daughters.

The family moved to Tucson in 1971 when Bill was hired as a professor of counseling and guidance at the University of Arizona. The couple celebrated their 58th wedding anniversary in 2015, and Bill died two weeks after the anniversary.

Susan saw her mother leave the assisted living facility in a van with her life belongings. "I don't know when I will be able to see her (in person) again. She will be in isolation for 14 days, which is a standard precaution. But, once she is out of isolation at the care center, the activities director will take an iPad into her room and let family members connect.

"She sounds so good and so happy there. There is a bit of relief knowing she is safe and is getting the help that she needs," said Susan, who drops off newspapers, chocolates, cards and love notes for her mom at the center's main door every day.

CONNECTING ON EASTER

Alice Hoffman and her family are looking forward to a big connection on Easter Sunday via the Zoom video conferencing app.

That is the day Hoffman, 90, and her five children and their spouses, along with nine grandchildren and one great-grandson hope to video-chat using smartphones, tablets or computers.

The family is spread from coast to coast and plans to tune in with one another and visit with their matriarch.

Hoffman, a former professor of oral history and labor studies at Penn State University and later a state director of a unit assisting employees who lost their jobs with the closure of factories and plants in the 1980s, lives at The Fountains at La Cholla on the northwest side.

It has been home for about two years for the active woman who went to her daughter's house nearby about three times a week for dinner, and both would go out to museums and Quaker meetings for worship.

Her daughter Gwen Harvey no longer is able to hug her mother or hold her hand since Hoffman remains in The Fountains, confined to her apartment where she lives independently and now eats alone. Harvey understands that it must be done for Hoffman's and residents' safekeeping since the prevalence of the coronavirus.

Hoffman's 3-year-old great-grandson, Asher, who calls her "GG" for great-grandma, has been missing her as well. He now talks to GG by phone, telling her about his cats and how they play hide and seek with him.

Martha Ingel, another daughter of Hoffman's who lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, and teaches sign language at a community college, contacted Ricky Garrett who is the technology guru for the Fountains. She asked for help in setting up the Zoom meeting between her mother and family. Garrett downloaded Zoom to Hoffman's computer and connected the mother and daughter face-to-face, bringing smiles and tears of joy.

The emotional video chat brought in Hoffman's granddaughter, Sarah Ingel, a modern dancer and choreographer, who shared masks she was sewing for family to use as protection against the coronavirus.

The video call was one of several dry runs for the Easter Day virtual gathering. "This has given us a human connection that is really evermore so important," said Martha Ingel.

COLORFUL CHALK ART

Drawings of the sun, balloons and flowers were among the messages of love written in chalk for Val Peterson.

The images and words appeared on the pavement in a parking lot outside of Peterson's window at The Watermark at Continental Ranch in Marana. He lives independently in an apartment at the assisted living retirement community.

"Family friends were concerned about me being confined to the building because of the coronavirus," wrote Peterson, 81, in an explanation to go with a photograph he took of the pop-up art.

The goal was to cheer him up, and the chalk art did. But it also moved him to tears because of the caring activity he witnessed outside his window days ago, wrote the former director of facilities management for Arizona State University. He retired in 2000.

Peterson has always been active, visiting his son Jeff Peterson, a retired Air Force pilot, who now does errands for his dad, including trips to the post office, to the supermarket and picking up his prescriptions. He drops off the items, including a big bag of popcorn, for his dad at the retirement community. He calls his father three times a day and also stays connected through FaceTime.

He said his father was active at the gym, exercise that he surely misses. Staying active is natural to Val Peterson, a native of Idaho Falls, Idaho, who grew up on a 150-acre family farm.

When he left the farm, Val attended the University of Utah in Salt Lake City and received a degree in 1962, majoring in mechanical engineering. He worked for design firms and Utah State University before accepting the job at ASU.

After retirement, Val Peterson and his wife, Marceil, traveled the world with relatives and friends and moved to Tucson in 2013. The couple, who reared six children, were married for more than six decades. Marceil died last year.

Jeff described his dad as “a best friend,” and he is working to have Zoom installed in Val’s iPad through the staff at the retirement community. He is hoping he, his sisters and their families can visit Val soon through video chat.

“I am not a huggy, kissy kind of guy, but my sisters would love all that (show of affection) with my dad when the time comes,” Jeff said.



Relatives of elderly residents at The Watermark at Continental Ranch made chalk drawings on the parking lot so residents could see them from their windows. Due to the COVID-19, relatives cannot visit family members at the facility.

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