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## For some seniors, pandemic trials have brought renewal



Sarah Matusek/The Christian Science Monitor

Sandra Bierman paints in an art studio at Frasier, a life plan community in Boulder, Colorado, on Aug. 20, 2021. During the pandemic, the professional artist was inspired to return to her craft after a nearly two-decade hiatus: "The creativity in there wasn't dead."

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BOULDER, COLORADO; GAITHERSBURG, MARYLAND; AND WASHINGTON

**P**urple, robin's-egg blue, white. Sandra Bierman pours layers of paint onto a canvas, then tilts it so the colors run.

“This art room is a lifesaver,” she says at the sink, rinsing fingers of acrylics.

Following a career in telecommunications, Ms. Bierman launched another act as a professional artist known for figurative works. She stopped painting in the early 2000s, however, to devote more time to her husband before he died.

### **WHY WE WROTE THIS**

**Pandemic society views older adults as a group at risk. But many have overcome labels of frailty. You can read more articles like this one in our Finding Resilience series.**

Now in her 80s, Ms. Bierman has spent the pandemic at a retirement community in Boulder, Colorado, where she grew depressed under the lockdown that began March 2020. Roughly a year passed, she says, before she conquered enough fear to leave her hallway.

Yet isolation also opened a new level of introspection. She says as months wore on she reflected on her goodness – her lifelong impulse to serve others.

Volunteering to teach peers art classes via closed-circuit television last spring was proof. That September, she built up the courage to submit some past work to an anti-ageist birthday card campaign. She was accepted.

Inspired, she resumed painting after nearly two decades. That confirmed “the creativity in there wasn’t dead,” she says. “I still had that, and that was a jewel.”

As older adults have faced increased social isolation, health officials have defined this age group as living in pandemic precarity. Yet many like Ms. Bierman have

overcome labels of frailty and demonstrated resilience. They say trials in lockdown unlocked a new chapter of personal growth.

“It’s always been the case that most older adults are very resilient, and that’s true with this pandemic as well,” says Peter Lichtenberg, director of the Wayne State University Institute of Gerontology.

## Winning

For a Maryland pastor, his rebound meant more than surviving the virus.

Would he ever swing a tennis racket again? the Rev. Dr. Malcolm Frazier wondered. After a COVID-19 diagnosis in summer 2020, he lay in the hospital unsure.

“I thought it was a death sentence,” he says.



The Rev. Dr. Malcolm Frazier stands in the chapel where he preaches once a month at the Asbury Methodist Village in Gaithersburg, Maryland, on Aug. 23, 2021. Since fully recovering from COVID-19, the pastor says he's found more empathy for fellow older adults he counsels who face difficult health and personal challenges.

Since leaving a lucrative corporate career in his 40s, Dr. Frazier has ministered through the United Methodist Church. He currently serves as director of pastoral care and counseling at Asbury Methodist Village, a continuing care retirement community in Gaithersburg, Maryland.

Dr. Frazier had always considered himself a rock, spiritually and mentally. But during his COVID-19 challenge, he says he went through “spiritual chaos.”

“I was seriously depleted,” he says. “My faith was shallow and weak.”

But Dr. Frazier also considers himself stubborn. “I can’t go out like this,” he recalls telling himself.

In addition to his medical treatment, he dug down into his reservoir of spiritual strength, taking inspiration from his understanding as a Christian of the term “resurrection.” Beyond a physical transformation, he says, it’s “an attitude of actually finding light where there’s darkness, finding hope where there is despair.”

Then he realized something important: “I said, ‘I can’t preach that until I live it.’”

His health began to improve, and he decided to be transparent about the uncertainty he felt. This became fodder for one of his first sermons back.

When he returned to Asbury several weeks later, Dr. Frazier found that his experience of sickness helped him connect with residents through a greater sense of empathy, as many are battling illness and isolation themselves. Now, the pastor speaks from the heart when he says he understands.

He hasn't considered retiring from work because he's "enjoying it too much."  
He's also back on the tennis court twice a week – and winning.

## Reserves of wisdom

In many ways, older adults have defied pandemic assumptions. In March 2020, "boomer remover" trended on social media as a nickname for the coronavirus. Yet that same month, scores of retired medical professionals returned to work at overwhelmed hospitals.

Some federal officials who've led the national pandemic response are long past traditional retirement age – including the current and former president. Anthony Fauci, the top infectious disease expert, entered his 80s last year.

Research conducted during the pandemic points to pockets of older-adult resilience. A January National Poll on Healthy Aging reveals that among some 2,000 respondents ages 50 to 80, four out of five reported their mental health to be as good as, or better than, 20 years ago.

These adults are sometimes able to "put things in context of an entire life history" and draw on past resilience, says Lauren Gerlach, geriatric psychiatrist and assistant professor at the University of Michigan, who contributed to the report.

"That resilience and wisdom that comes with aging, of having gone through tough times in the past and being able to get through it ... I think can help put people in a better position in the face of stressors," says Dr. Gerlach. Since the survey was a snapshot in time from earlier this year, she stresses the importance of continued monitoring.

A currently unpublished study co-written by Dr. Lichtenberg at Wayne State University suggests a similar bright spot. It analyzed Census Bureau Household

Pulse Survey data from nearly the full first year of the pandemic for over 100,000 older adults of color. Across the Hispanic, Black, and Asian respondents ages 50 and up, rates of anxiety or depression appeared to decrease with age.

Food insecurity, job loss, and low income, however, suggested an association with high rates of mental health challenges.

“Basic needs really are drivers of mental health problems. Not the only drivers, obviously, but quite significant,” he says.

## “Always singing”

When clouds of depression darkened days in lockdown, Eduardo González stared in the mirror and tried to think of what his grandfather would say.



Eduardo González holds his guitar in the community room at Casa Iris, a residence for low-income Hispanic seniors where he lives, in Washington, D.C., Aug. 20, 2021. Mr. González says he pulled through a difficult period of depression during the pandemic with the help of group therapy and sharing his creativity with others.

The former chef in Washington remembers how his grandfather would coax him, a young boy in Mexico, to haul a heavy sack of corn as a lesson in persistence. During the pandemic, Mr. González meditated on these memories.

“You have to be strong, you have to keep going. Don’t be afraid,” he imagined his grandfather telling him.

Drawing on his past has helped Mr. González persevere through difficult days at Casa Iris, a residence for low-income Hispanic seniors, where he spent 10 months with limited access to communal areas. A local senior center where he took art classes also shut down.

“I was so depressed,” he says sitting in the Casa Iris community room, no longer used for storage as residents are welcomed back.

Staff noticed he was struggling and placed him in group therapy this April, which Mr. González says helped. But what really lifted his spirits over time was drawing on his heritage in ways that helped him connect with others.

When restrictions loosened at Casa Iris, he began playing guitar for other residents, brightening spirits with traditional Mexican melodies and other songs from across Latin America.

“I’m a bit of a showoff,” he says, a smile barely visible at the ends of his mask.

Like Ms. Bierman in Boulder, the octogenarian is sharing his talents with peers. At the senior center, which reopened in July, he’s teaching tunes to *viejitas*, as he calls them. He says it gives him courage to know that despite the darkness he

still sometimes feels, he can help others strengthen their voice.

Pedro Lima, the property manager at Casa Iris, has noticed how music and art have brightened Mr. González's demeanor.

“When he comes downstairs, he always has his guitar, and he's always singing,” says Mr. Lima. He's the proud recipient of a painting by Mr. González, who spends two hours a day – no matter his mood – with a paintbrush in hand.

Mr. González is currently painting an angel. He says it reflects the assurance that someone is watching over him.

## Full days

Beyond maintaining regular sleep and healthy lifestyles, says Dr. Gerlach, pursuing activities that are personally meaningful – like volunteering – can help support and improve older adults' mental health.

For Ms. Bierman, one such highlight has been biweekly virtual chats with family she misses in California and England. She took the initiative to set up the Zoom link.

Full days at Frasier, her life plan community, also keep her spirits up. Beyond hours spent on personal art projects, she leads twice-weekly sessions in the art room and participates in a monthly, local poetry meet-up. She's seeking more ways to volunteer, too.

“I just wish I were five people,” says the artist, white apron smudged with color. “There are so many things to do.”



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