

ARTS & STYLE

Friend's guidance unwanted

ADVICE, 10B

Seniors strive to rebuild support systems after pandemic isolation

BY AMELIA BENAVIDES-COLÓN
The Detroit News

When the coronavirus hit Michigan, American House Dearborn Heights, like other senior living places, went into lockdown, and life for the 101 residents changed overnight.

Tom Szwajkowski didn't fear the loneliness as intensely as others at the senior living facility because he knew he would be quarantining with his wife, Judy.

But eight months into the pandemic, his wife of 62 years died, leaving the 83-year-old alone and isolated from their only daughter, Lois Allen, who wasn't allowed inside the facility due to COVID-19 fears. When the lockdown ended the first week of June, Allen created a doorbell system at her father's window to let him know she was outside, he said.

"When we had to lock down, it was pretty bad," Szwajkowski said. "(My daughter) used to visit me every other day (before the pandemic). We would talk for hours and play dominos."

A year and a half of COVID-induced isolation has left its impact on every age group, but particularly seniors. The separations and the reworking of daily life could trigger mental and physical deterioration, experts say.

But senior facilities and others are trying to fight these effects by engaging seniors in physical activities as the weather warmed and restrictions have been reduced. Learning new skills was another way to generate mental stimulation, or learn enough to get by.

Research suggests isolation can produce loneliness and depression, said Jessica Robbins, assistant professor of anthropology and gerontology at Wayne State University, who studies the effects of isolation on seniors. Worse, it can shorten lifespan.

"Social isolation is associated with an increased risk of premature mortality from all causes," Robbins said. "It's similar to the risks of smoking, obesity and lack of physical activity. As humans, we are fundamentally social creatures — like human life, that's an inherently, inextricably social endeavor."

As vaccination rates rise and mask mandates fall throughout the country and Michigan, some seniors can now leave the confines of their facilities or homes for the first time in over a year and a half. This fragile transition back to some normalcy remains challenged by another rise in COVID-19 cases rise with the spread of the highly contagious delta variant.

But those trying to exit isolation are discovering it can be hard to rebuild a support system lost during quarantine.

Getting back into the world

On June 1, American House senior living facilities began opening their doors for the first time without restrictions since the pandemic hit.

The staff aimed to keep residents active during COVID lockdowns with socially distanced activities, said Elizabeth Hatfield, a certified dementia practitioner and life enrichment director for American House Dearborn Heights.

But residents missed the annual Senior Olympics, she said.

On Aug. 2, the event returned with competitions for Frisbee throw, bean bag toss, trivia challenges, balloon volleyball, Wii bowling and more. Hatfield created the Senior Olympics when she noticed a morale boost seniors seemed to get from physical exercise. Residents trained for 12 weeks in preparation for the event.

"If I was just two minutes late (for training), they would hunt me down," Hatfield said. "They're competitive and excited, and it's very rewarding to see them happy and smile and just meet other people."

For Jeanne Lillard, a resident since 2003, the Senior Olympics are rewarding because of her competitive nature. She spent time with other residents outside the facility and had her sisters, Elizabeth Brown and Susan Jabara, there to cheer her on.

Brown said she and Jabara saw their sister almost every day during quarantine and still brought her food and cared for her, which they considered a lifeline.

"I'm so glad we were still able to come in and visit her," Brown said. "If she wasn't able to see us every day, it would kill her."

The effects of staying safe

Differing living conditions created larger divides between those seniors who have support systems and those who don't.

For some seniors living outside the main facility at American House, the rules weren't as restrictive but they still had to change



Tom Szwajkowski, 83, throws a softball 44 feet during the softball throw competition at the Senior Olympics at American House Senior Homes in Dearborn Heights.



Geri Sedo, 89, holds the Olympic torch during the opening ceremony at American House.

their routines to stay safe.

"Sometimes when families would visit and because they couldn't come in, you would see chairs outside the windows and they would visit through the window," said resident Geri Sedo.

The 89-year-old and her best friend, Margaret Frankowitz, 93, live outside the main building in senior apartments called the Villas at American House. They, too, had to change their routines to stay safe, even though they weren't as restricted as other residents who were in lockdown in the main building.

"I would text (my daughter) my grocery list and she would do my shopping and leave it on the bench," Sedo said. "And then she'd stand on the sidewalk and I stayed by the door and we could visit for a while."

Managing expectations

Despite the return to some normal activities this summer, it needs to be treated as a transition, Wayne State's Robbins said.

"We can't expect things to just snap back to how they were before," she said. "We know that what we've lived through has an effect on us, and that's at an individual level, an interpersonal level, a collective level."

As caregivers, families and facilities open the doors to seniors again, Robbins said it's important to manage expectations and assess their comfort levels.

Another source of anxiety on the horizon: the resurgence of the virus through more easily transmitted variants. The delta strain emerged in early July and by the end of the month accounted for more than 80% of new COVID cases across the country, according to the CDC.

Dr. Gregory Krol, a gerontologist at Henry Ford Health System, urges seniors to continue to be careful. But "if they're fully vaccinated, they can be a little more comfortable getting out and visiting," he said.

Isolation is manageable when you have a support system, said Melissa Draughn, director of social work at the Hannan Center in Midtown Detroit.

"I think the misconception is that people are unwilling to adjust themselves to come outside," Draughn said. Adjustments can include wearing masks, social distancing and avoiding large crowds, she said.

"Just take things slow," Draughn said.

As the former director of LaSed Senior Wellness Center, Guadalupe Lara saw what can happen when seniors lose their resources.

LaSed in southwest Detroit, a bilingual senior center, was forced to close in March 2020 but created a telephone wellness service to stay connected to the seniors.

The service reached about 300 people daily to check on their health and needs. The LaSed center did grocery shopping, personal shopping and dropped groceries off on porches.

"They still felt connected, and that to me is what kept many of them mentally healthy," Lara said.

As the world coped with isolation with Zoom meetings and virtual dinners with family, elders who lacked those computer skills were left behind and alone.

The technology gap created not only a social divide, but seniors were left without the ability to set up doctor appointments, Lara said. Doctors offered video appointments to replace the in-person visits, and for those who lacked the technological know-how, it meant being cut off from health services.

"They are at a very big disadvantage because they're not computer literate and they're not English speaking," Lara said of LaSed seniors.

How to help struggling seniors

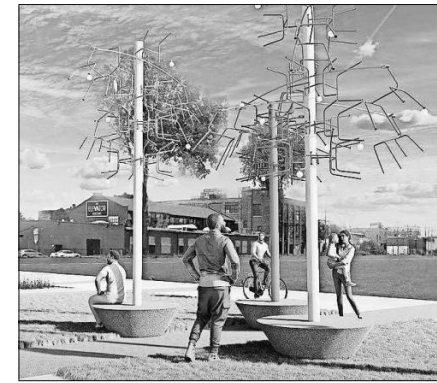
Start by assessing your seniors comfort level. Do they want to continue wearing masks? Do they want to avoid large crowds?

Once you know the comfort level of your senior, take it slow. The worst thing you can do is push somebody past their limits so start with small trips in lightly crowded locations and work your way up.

Some grocery stores accommodate senior hours where shopping can be done earlier in the morning before large crowds have a chance to form — look for accommodations like this.

Use technology to your advantage. The silver lining of the pandemic is that it introduced people to virtual communication platforms like Zoom and Google Meet. Teach your seniors how to use this software so they can feel less isolated from their friends and family.

And finally, there's no rush to get back into normal routines. Starting with walks around the block is a great way to show your seniors that it's safe to be outside again.



The Breath of Fresh Chair installation features parts of 48 disassembled Eames chairs. Observers can walk around and within it "to contemplate the connection between nature and the built environment," according to Design Core Detroit.

Design Core Detroit / Instagram

Detroit Month of Design returns

BY MAUREEN FEIGHAN
The Detroit News

Design in Detroit? It's so big, it has its own festival. Eleven years after the Detroit Month of Design debuted to showcase the city's burgeoning role in the design world, the festival returns Wednesday with its biggest lineup yet, featuring unique art installations, workshops and more.

This year's Detroit Month of Design, put on by Design Core Detroit, will feature more than 150 participants and 85 in-person and virtual events all spread out over the month of September — up from 70 last year.

"We're excited," said Kiana Wenzell, director of the Detroit Month of Design. "...The festival is for everyone."

And while one of its most popular events, Murals in the Dark at Eastern Market, won't happen again this year because of the pandemic, organizers say what they will have is more installations than they've ever had, which is more than 20.

One of those is called Breath of Fresh Chair, an outdoor installation near the state's outdoor adventure center that feature the iconic Eames chair.

"It'll be all of these Eames chair parts creating a sculpture," said Wenzell.

The Detroit Month of Design was created after Detroit was designated in 2015 as the United States' only UNESCO City of Design. It joined a network of now 31 design cities and 180 cities focused "on using creativity as a driver for sustainable and equitable development around the world," according to Design Core Detroit.

The festival focuses primarily on three types of design — the built environment, visual communication and product design such as jewelry and fashion.

What Design Core Detroit learned from putting on last year's festival, also a mix of virtual and in-person events, said Executive Director Olga Stella, is how to put on a successful event amid a pandemic. They had 50,000 participants last year.

"We're using the same hybrid format — some virtual events, some in-person, time tickets, a lot outdoors," said Stella. "... A lot of (last year's events) were taking place over multiple days so we could really spread out attendance. And people felt safe."

One in-person immersive installation that debuts Sept. 10 this year, sponsored by Rocket Companies, is called Moments of Immersion by Detroit-based artist Yazmin Dababneh. Held inside the First National Building on Woodward in Detroit, it combines physical sculptures and experimental film.

"You've seen some outside artists come into Detroit and do these immersive installations. This is the first time we have a homegrown, young designer doing something like this and I think it's going to be just fun, interesting and really memorable," said Stella. "It's such a good example of what the festival means for emerging talents — for designers who might not have a platform to show their work to a large audience."

Several tours also are planned throughout the month, including several at the new Oudolf Garden Detroit on Belle Isle. Another on Sept. 14 will celebrate Detroit's Black urban planners with a tour at the Julian C. Madison Building. And on Sept. 16-17, Hamilton Anderson Associates will offer tours of what was once Detroit's Paradise Valley, a thriving business and entertainment district near the city's former Black Bottom neighborhood.

This year's programming is really about inclusion and accessibility, said Stella.

"The need for accessibility and inclusion, it's relevant," said Stella. "It's relevant. And people want to engage in it... There's a lot of great content for professional designers but there's something for everyone."

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Grey Ghost team to put new restaurant in former Eddystone Hotel

BY MELODY BAETENS
The Detroit News

Olympia Development has selected Four Man Ladder Management — which operates the popular Grey Ghost restaurant and Second Best bar in Detroit — to operate a new dining concept on the ground floor of the Eddystone Hotel project.

Four Man Ladder includes chefs John Vermiglio and Joe Giacomino, beverage director Will Lee and director of operations Michael Gray. Their first project in the city was hip Grey Ghost, a restaurant highlighting meat dishes and craft cocktails that opened in the Midtown/Brush Park area near Watson and Woodward in 2016.

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