

BETTER *with* AGE

INSIDE:

Making your end-of-life wishes known.

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Help your neighbors stay connected

BY CELE GARRETT

In the best of times, our older neighbors are at the greatest risk of feeling socially isolated and lonely. This is especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic, as these very same folks are most at risk if they were to catch the virus, so they are exercising every caution to keep themselves safe.

It's a trying time for all of us, especially our older residents. Yet, I see so much evidence of the wonderful ways our citizens are connecting with one another right now. Alexandrians have always been caring and generous – and lately they've become pretty creative in the ways they're going about it.

At Woodbine Rehabilitation and Healthcare Center in Alexandria, the 307 residents were encouraged when they received handwritten cards from Alexandrians. The project was initiated by the Facebook group "Alexandrians Supporting Alexandrians During COVID." Woodbine kept the cards "in quarantine" for 48 hours before delivering. In addition, a Girl Scout troop from Charles Barrett Elementary School wrote handmade cards to Woodbine's caregivers.

The other day, a car drove up to Silverado Memory Care and some kids hopped out to hang homemade colorful banners along the fence. These were family members of residents who wanted to thank the professionals caring for their loved ones whom they cannot see in person. In



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addition, a homemade face-mask-making initiative has been heartening.

It's more important than ever to check in with your friends and neighbors right now. A friend recently let me know that she was checking in regularly with a mutual friend. She calls ahead to tell her when she'll hang a new batch of bananas on her backdoor handle.

And though seniors are a population of concern right now, everyone is experiencing some level of stress. Even though most people are now donning masks in public, we can still speak when passing by someone, nod our head to acknowledge them and smile with our eyes.

Though nothing can replace in-person contact, technology has presented some wonderful solutions. For one-on-one connections, FaceTime and Skype are great standbys. Recently, an 80-year-old Alexandria acquaintance told me she had used FaceTime to connect with her 16-month-old great-grandson. He was comfortable with the idea of staring at the screen when she appeared and reached for her. Even at his very young age, he wasn't fazed by this virtual

connection.

If you know someone who is eager to connect with family or friends through video but needs some help learning a new technology tool, reach out to see if you can offer them a phone or online tutorial.

The other evening, my friend and I simultaneously watched the same episode of our current favorite Netflix series while using the feature Netflix Party on our respective computer screens. We were able to use the "chat" feature to make our usual colorful commentary throughout the show.

Other people are telling me they and their friends are reading the same book together and having an im-

promptu phone "book club" discussion. House Party, Google Hangout and Zoom can be good group video platforms. Just be sure to add security to your meetings so you don't have any unwelcome visitors. At Home in Alexandria is working hard to take our programs and events to the virtual realm using Zoom to help keep our members and volunteers connected and entertained while we stay at home.

Fred Rogers' wisdom continues to serve us during these uncertain times. We recall his well-known story: "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers.

You will always find people who are helping.'"

The health care workers, the caregivers at our senior living facilities and the first responders are all helpers, but remember that we are helpers too. Our children are learning first-hand that the kind gestures they make to their neighbors right now matter. This troubling time is providing them with an experience they will always remember, and it will help shape who they become.

Cele Garrett is the executive director for At Home in Alexandria, a member-driven, nonprofit village that builds and sustains a 55+ community to successfully navigate aging.

Our hearts are full.

We want to share our gratitude for all of our hardworking, compassionate associates who are caring for our residents and keeping their days alive with love and joy during this trying time.

We are also humbled by the outpouring of kindness from our current and former resident families who have sent meals, treats and gift cards for our team.



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