Pat Spiegel of Ferrisburgh whacks a tennis ball while Peggy Cox of Salisbury backs her up. See more photos on Page 18.
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‘We’re Alz in this together’

Community discussions seek to offer more understanding and support for people with Alzheimer’s

By KATIE FUTTERMAN

MIDDLEBURY — Vermont, as the third-oldest state in the country, is plagued by Alzheimer’s disease. More than 13,000 Vermonters over the age of 65 are living with this form of dementia — a figure that is expected to increase 30% in the next three years, according to the Alzheimer’s Association.

“My experience is every single time I go out in public and ask people ‘Do you know anybody? Have you experienced this anywhere in your life? So many hands go up.’” Meg Polyte, policy director of the Vermont chapter of the Alzheimer’s Association, said at a meeting in Middlebury last week.

Sure enough, the room far overflowed the initial plan of 25 people, with people from all over, and all sorts of experiences sitting, standing on the side.

The meeting, organized by the Alzheimer’s Association, was called “We’re Alz in this together, Destigmatizing dementia in Vermont.” Caretakers, those with Alzheimer’s disease or other dementias, policymakers and members of the public gathered on Thursday, June 30, at the Congregational Church of Middlebury to discuss how Addison County currently supports those with Alzheimer’s and how it can improve.

The high rate of Alzheimer’s is accompanied by a workforce shortage, which results in people not being able to get services that would help them, according to Polyte. There is already a waitlist of almost a year to get a diagnosis through UVM Medical Center. Without a diagnosis, a person can’t apply for disability funding from the government or get access to necessary services.

A TRUE LIFE STORY

Pamela Smith, one of the speakers at the event, is no stranger to such hurdles in getting care for dementia. Starting a few years ago when she was only 50 years old, the Middlebury woman was telling her doctor during her regular visits every three months about problems she was experiencing with her memory. She received a wide range of explanations — from menopause to her chronic pain (See Alzheimer’s, Page 14)
Seniors see pattern changes during/after COVID

By WILLIAM REED

MIDDLEBURY — The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly changed the lives of every single person — for some drastically so. But for older adults, greater negative outcomes have stretched far and wide for what seems like a longer time.

Nevertheless, seniors have found ways to cope with changes in their daily routines. Max, 94, and Lois, 91, Kraus reside in Middlebury’s EastView retirement community.

To help alleviate these general feelings of anxiety and fear, they look to the small things that bring them satisfaction.

“We have neighbors, which is a plus of living in our community,” they told the Independent. “During COVID, our main social life was walking up and down our little road, encountering people on their way to the mailbox, whenever it’s clear, and you’d stop and have a chat. There’s a lot of that kind of contact here.”

On the effects the pandemic has on communities like EastView, the Krauses discussed what stayed constant and what was noticeably different. Lois continued to cook, but she has the ease to do so because they live in a cottage separate from the community’s main building, which has had stricter rules because people living there are in closer proximity.

“They were shut down for months on end. Occasionally as things got better, they opened. And then as we started getting an occasional case within EastView, they would close back down,” Lois said.

Because of federal rules about keeping personal health information private, there’s discretion regarding people’s medical conditions. Max and Lois said that they’d hear about who had COVID-19 primarily through rumors, which also proved to be mentally draining at times.

Joanne Corbett, executive director of Elderly Services Inc., understands that the pandemic has led to increased loneliness and isolation among seniors in general. The fear that many older people experience is not surprising given that nearly three-quarters of Americans who have died have been age 65 or older.

“Given the particular threat (of the pandemic) to elders, many older people have experienced increased anxiety and fear,” Corbett said. “Many older people have felt driven to learn to use technology such as Facetime and Zoom as a way to feel more connected to their friends and family.”

Elderly Services, based in Middlebury, works with seniors across Addison County. It provides a safe and closely supervised home away from home for older people whose independence has lessened due to stroke, other chronic illness, dementia or simply advanced age. By providing transportation to and from the center, nursing attention, meals cooked by chefs, activities, and entertainment throughout the day, and help with mobility, ESI acts as an eldercare partner with families.

The Krauses were lucky enough to have moved into EastView before the pandemic hit, so were able to follow the more traditional retirement path, and they had some ties into the community before the isolation of the initial quarantine and eventual general restrictions of the pandemic set in. They lived in Philadelphia for most of their lives and had a cabin in Goshen that they visited for skiing and vacations until they retired. They decided they liked living in Vermont more than Philadelphia, and 20 years ago moved to Middlebury full time and have never looked back.

But when the pandemic hit, Max and Lois, along with other residents and workers at places like EastView, noticed a change in activity in person. Family gatherings took a pause, medical appointments in person, activities, and entertainment throughout the day, and help with mobility. ESI acts as an eldercare partner with families.

The Krauses were lucky enough to protect us from any outside contact,” Max said. “In the beginning, we weren’t being tested all the time. Neither was the staff. There was a long learning curve. We just got shut down and were told to stay as isolated as possible.”

Many older people did less traveling or in-person activity. Family gatherings took a pause, medical appointments in person became infrequent. With less physical activity in person, seniors chose to stay at their own homes instead of being confined in retirement communities.

“People who put off moving (to EastView) were not looking forward to being locked into a place where they couldn’t have visitors,” Max said. “So, people were not moving in as readily as they might have been. Therefore, some of them came in sicker than they typically would have been several years ago,” said Max.

When activity changes substantially affected seniors, it made it so older adults weren’t seeking the care they needed, and more people were getting sicker because of the pandemic’s means of isolation. “There’s a national trend, being in one’s home longer now. Therefore, people are getting to retirement communities when they’re less agile and less interested in taking part. We see that as a problem here,” said Max.

ELDERS MAKE CHANGES

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Alzheimer’s

(Continued from Page 11)

condition, and was diagnosed with anxiety and depression, neither of which she had ever experienced.

One day at work, she was writing something that usually took her 10 or 15 minutes. “I thought I had been spending about an hour at it, which I was really frustrated about. And I looked up at the clock and it had been four hours and I called my doctor’s office in tears. My hands are shaking, and it’s like, I don’t know what’s going on.”

From there, she spent about eight months being sent from specialist to specialist, until eventually she was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer’s. “And by that point it was a relief, weirdly, because it had been years of me saying, ‘No, something’s wrong,’” she said.

But even after getting diagnosed, Smith had trouble accessing services, a common problem for those recently diagnosed, according to Sen. Ruth Hardy, D-Addison County. It was especially difficult for Smith given her younger age, as services for older people, such as Age Well would not serve her, she said.

Many of these funding and accessibility problems are caused by a low level of visibility of the population. “Because this is a very unseen population, and older people in general are very unseen on the political landscape, it means they’re less likely to get services and support created for them,” Polyte said. “The need doesn’t seem as high because they’re not just out there in people’s faces as much.”

The Alzheimer’s Association, which advocates for other forms of dementia as well, hosted the meeting as the kickoff to series of gatherings in different counties around Vermont. The goal of the meetings is to increase awareness and hear from people firsthand what they want — whether it be an expansion of resources or an increase in accessibility to existing programs, according to Polyte.

The central questions guiding the meeting were: What is it like to be diagnosed with and live with Alzheimer’s or another dementia? What is it like to care for someone with dementia? What services are available in Vermont and in your community, and what services

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Watch for warning signs in elderly drivers

Having a discussion with an elderly parent about whether they should still be driving may be the hardest thing you’ll ever have to do. Even though it’s painful, it’s necessary. You could save your parent’s life or the life of another driver, like me. Recently, an 88-year-old woman ran a red light and T-boned my car on the passenger side. I wasn’t hurt and neither was she. Fortunately, no one was riding with me. If someone had been sitting on the impact side, they could have been seriously injured. If the elderly driver had been coming the other way and hit me on the driver’s side, I don’t want to think what could have happened.

The elderly driver admitted to the police that she did not see the red light. She obviously didn’t see my red Honda in front of her in the intersection, as there was no evidence she tried to stop before plowing into me. A witness told me that in the minutes before, she was following the elderly driver and was concerned that her erratic actions might cause a crash. Her fears quickly came true. TIME FOR MANDATORY TESTING

There are now more elderly drivers on the roads, as people are living longer and keeping their licenses longer. The number of drivers ages 65 and older has increased 60% since 2000, according to the Federal Highway Administration.

In Vermont, 23.66% of all licensed drivers are 65 or older. The number of lives lost on Vermont roads has dropped over the past 10 years due to enhanced police enforcement, and many of the lives saved are drivers ages 65 and older. But the number of people dying in crashes involving drivers ages 65 and older has increased 32% since 2010.

There are more elderly drivers on the road, more elderly passengers in the vehicles, and the number of older drivers who are receiving many warning signs of unsafe driving.

Warning Signs of Unsafe Driving

If you believe a driver may be a hazard on the road, encourage him or her to visit the AAA Senior Driver site (tinyurl.com/AAA-mature-drivers) to use their Self-Rating Tool. You may also assess their driving ability by reviewing the following warning signs:

- **Diminished eyesight.**
- **Suffered stroke or heart attack.**
- **Difficulty negotiating sharp turns and intersections.**
- **Hesitation over right-of-way decisions.**
- **Becoming lost on familiar routes.**
- **Feeling nervous or exhausted after driving.**
- **Receiving traffic violations or found at fault in crashes.**
- **Neglecting to buckle the seat belt.**
- **Difficulty moving foot between pedals.**
- **Difficulty merging onto freeways or turning onto busy streets.**
- **Relying only on mirrors rather than turning fully to check blind spots.**
- **Missing stop signs and traffic signals.**
- **Frequently weaving, straddling, and drifting into other lanes without signaling.**
- **Attempting to turn from the wrong lane.**
- **Receiving frequent honks from other motorists.**
- **Finding scrapes and dents on vehicles, mailboxes, and other stationary objects.**

These are just a few of the many warning signs of unsafe driving. If you feel the driver may present a hazard on the road, it may be time for the driver to give up the keys. This can be a very difficult call for you to make, especially if the driver is a parent or other close figure used to having their independence. What you must keep in mind is their safety and the safety of others must come first.

— Vermont Department of Motor Vehicles

**Community Forum**

This commentary is by Steve Larose, a writer and editor who lives in Barre Town.

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There is also a silver alert system, which was put in place since 1991. It added a member from the hospital community, and ensured that any appointed to it had direct, lived experience caring for his mother, who was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer’s at 58, and died 10 years later, in September 2020. “As a family, we felt like an island,” he said.

Backlund encouraged caretakers to accept the grief of losing someone, and even ask for help as they slowly make their way through the process. He related to Smith’s discussion of the isolation of the disease.

Smith said that what helped her most was when she discovered a support group based in Massachusetts.

Elise Blair of Middlebury shared that her current caregiver support group run through the church is full, but she is looking to start a new one. Those interested can contact her at 802-388-4540. Project Independence and Elderly Services also has caregiver support groups and individualized elder therapy, according to social worker Eileen Lawson.

Addison County Home Health and Hospice also offers a wide-range of services for those with Alzheimer’s and other dementias as well as their caregivers, including small tasks like laundry and help with medicine in order to help people stay at home longer, said Deborah Wesley, the organization’s chief executive officer.

Hardy also emphasized the importance of personal stories in enacting change. Smith and her daughter testified twice at the Vermont statehouse, went to D.C. to talk to the federal delegation and have done several media interviews. Polyte hopes to build more advocates through events like this one.

"A series of losses"

Although Smith supports the goal of working toward a cure for Alzheimer’s, she knows it will not happen in her lifetime. She hopes, instead for more discussion around the disease, and actions that can be taken to make living with it easier.

Smith described Alzheimer’s as a series of losses. She stopped working, can’t follow the plots of books and television, doesn’t cook alone and is phasing out of driving. “Bad days are bad. Bad days, it’s hard to feel like I have purpose. That’s the difference. Some days I can remember that I still have important things to do, and bad days I go, ‘yeah, really?’”

She fills her days gardening and spending time with family, as well as making flower pins in the Alzheimer’s colors, which were sold at the event.

At the end of the meeting, members wrote sticky notes on the board in answer to a few of the guiding questions.

One meeting participant, whose 70-year-old brother recently showed signs of dementia after sustaining a brain injury, was curious about preventative measures such as nutrition.

Most common among the notes were calls for increased funding and care for caregivers, and some said they had more questions about dealing with this than answers.

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CURTIS BORDEN, 68, of Weybridge helps keep fit and trim in the pool at the Vermont Sun health club last week, taking part in an aqua aerobics class designed for seniors. The class, led by Terrie Davis at the Middlebury facility, is held three times week and attracts almost as many men as women.

Independent photos/Steve James

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Exercise pool
CURTIS BORDEN, 68, of Weybridge helps keep fit and trim in the pool at the Vermont Sun health club last week, taking part in an aqua aerobics class designed for seniors. The class, led by Terrie Davis at the Middlebury facility, is held three times week and attracts almost as many men as women.

Independent photos/Steve James

Addison Independent | SENIOR LIFESTYLES | Thursday, July 7, 2022 — PAGE 17
Ladies doubles
PLAYERS OF A certain age like (left to right above) Mary O’Shea of Weybridge, Pat Spiegel of Ferrisburgh, Rene Saenger of Shoreham and Peggy Cox of Salisbury meet regularly for matches at Middlebury Indoor Tennis. The Middlebury facility offers seniors discounted rates on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons.

Independent photos/Steve James

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Driving

(Continued from Page 15)
drivers are 65 or older. That’s the third-highest percentage in the country — even higher than Florida’s. Almost 6% of Vermont drivers are 80 or older. I know several people in that age group who safely drive themselves every day. But the truth is people age differently. One octogenarian could be a safe driver, and another could be a hazard.

In Vermont, we do not have mandatory vision tests or driving exams for older people to retain their licenses. Sen. Mark MacDonald of Orange County has introduced a bill (S.276) that would require Vermonters age 75 or older to pass a vision and road test to renew their driver’s license. (The bill didn’t get out of committee before the end of the session.)

While taking a vision and road test would no doubt be inconvenient for elderly drivers, to me it seems reasonable to protect public safety. With so many elderly drivers on our roads, we need a way to determine which are no longer safe to be at the wheel. NECESSARY CONVERSATION Whether you think mandatory tests are a good idea or not, if you have an elderly parent or other relative who’s on the road, please talk with them about their driving. Are they still safe, or should they give up their keys? Is there an interim step they can take, such as getting an eye exam or having a doctor review and adjust their medications? Should their driving be restricted in some way?

To help you have that conversation, the Vermont Department of Motor Vehicles lists the warning signs of unsafe driving on its website at dmv.vermont.gov/licenses/mature-drivers. If there is any doubt in your mind or your parent’s about their ability to drive safely, please consider contacting the Department of Motor Vehicles to request a driver reexamination. There is information about how to do that on the department’s website.

Driving is a privilege many older people want to hold on to for as long as possible to retain their independence. As their children, it’s up to us to carefully monitor how they’re doing and be ready to take action, if necessary, to prevent a tragedy.

Editor’s note: This commentary ran on VTDigger.org in April.

Almost 6% of Vermont drivers are age 80 or older.

Changing patterns

(Continued from Page 12)
and chats, but also they’ve become more technologically savvy, in terms of zooming and learning to navigate telehealth. Elderly Services works with seniors to help make telehealth appointments, which Corbett says, “has worked better than anyone imagined.”

Corbett said she is elated about Medicare’s covering of the payment of telehealth, which has undoubtedly benefited seniors.

While some of the change for everyday senior patterns revolves around COVID has been for the better, some fears and anxieties remain. “Lois has been very careful when she goes shopping,” her husband said. “It’s concerning, but we’re very lucky.” Despite rules and restrictions becoming more lax lately, Lois and Max remain cautious and do the best they can to prevent COVID contraction.

On the subject, Corbett said that seniors are still uneasy, as they should be, about being indoors in larger crowds. “Some say they will always wear a mask when out shopping. Many have had to become more technology savvy and say they will continue to use Facetime, Zoom, Instagram,” she said.

But as people find ways to live with the pandemic, many seniors are finding ways to do things like visit family members. “We’re now able to travel and can have grandchildren come to visit. We’ve been to California when COVID let up a year ago,” Max said.

Max Kraus takes a balanced view on the pandemic. “I think everybody has pulled together, there’s a very strong feeling of cooperation and support,” he said. “But it has still been hard. I’m sure there are some people who are still afraid …. And, of course, there are people who have health issues that impact how seriously they should look at contact with other people.”

Even though vaccines have provided some protection against the most severe infection of COVID, family visits and travel have resumed somewhat. But many older people continue to limit social contact and avoid crowded events. Some things may never return to normal. “It will always be normal now to see some people wearing face masks in public. It will be normal to see everyone wearing masks in health care/medical settings,” said Corbett. “And, for some families, it will be normal to all do rapid virus tests before and after a family visit.”
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