

## Families can finally connect in person at senior communities

By Patricia Logan

Shirley Olson walks out of the Hover Community Assisted Living Resident, a vision in blue. The 93-year-old is wearing a vest that matches the sky. Dark blue mountains and yellow stars decorate the bandana that covers her hair. A gray curl slips free. Her opulent blue eyes light up at the sight of her sons, John and Paul, sitting in opposite corners beneath a white canopy on the front lawn. Today they are free of the windows and walls that have separated them for most of the past four months of the coronavirus pandemic.

“It just felt more personalized, as opposed to talking on my phone through glass,” said her eldest son, John Olson. “It was really great.” This was their first official, in-person visit at the Longmont senior living residence his mom calls home.

A staff member escorts Shirley to a white bench beneath the tent. The family looks at each other and settles into their seats. For an awkward moment it’s clear that something is missing. “We couldn’t hug. That would have been the only thing, but we can’t do that,” John said. But he’s grateful that there was only 12 feet of air and face masks between them. That’s a big step forward.

“You’re wearing your bandana on your head,” said John.

“You like that?” replied Shirley, touching the cotton scarf affectionately. She hasn’t had a haircut in months. Her granddaughter usually does it. That’s yet to come.

“Everybody says to say hello to you. They miss you,” John said, sharing news of family and friends.

Shirley leans back and forth, shifts side to side, clasps her hands together and holds them to her heart. They talk about their plans for a family reunion later this summer. That’s iffy now. Four of Shirley’s kids are in Colorado, two would be coming from out of state, one with an infant. It doesn’t look like she’ll meet the new baby this year with coronavirus cases steadily rising in Colorado and raging in other states.

Shirley and other elders are especially vulnerable. Fortunately, Hover Community hasn’t had a single resident get the virus. That’s unusual since the virus has devastated so many other term-term care facilities. As of last week, 293 residents or staff in Boulder County long-term care facilities have tested positive or probable for COVID-19 and 57 have died. Fortunately those numbers have dropped significantly in the past two months.

“The stories that make the headlines are the ones that make people shake their head and say ‘that’s awful.’ But there are so many wonderful stories every day in senior communities,” said Lisa Czolowski, CEO of Hover Community.

“Certainly the virus has challenged people to remember that we’re in elder’s homes and we’re here to take care of them, but also give them access to things that make life worth living and get out of bed every morning. It’s important to give people a sense of safety and comfort while knowing they need to laugh and exercise and still have a way to socialize,” Czolowski said.

The staff has been helping families find creative ways to stay connected throughout different phases of Colorado’s lockdown and slow easing of restrictions during the pandemic. “There have been a lot of activities around those windows,” Czolowski said.

There were Mother’s Day picnics with families setting up tables and folding chairs outside while mom dined on the other side of the glass from the safety of her room. Some families have decorated windows and put messages on paper so when their loved one opens the curtains in the morning they get a surprise greeting. There have been four-legged visitors - dogs, cats and a therapy alpaca.

In the past few weeks residents have been allowed to leave Hover Community and go to the homes of friends or families. Recently, the facility started allowing people to schedule one-hour visits on the grounds, under the designated outdoor canopy. Temperatures are taken and masks and social distancing are required.

“I think people really appreciate they can come and have face-to-face. That obviously changed that disconnect and isolation they were feeling,” Czolowski said.

John said that his mom, Shirley, has rolled with all the restrictions and changes, “You could tell that she was happy. It was different, but she’s a survivor. She always has a positive attitude and she kept it up during this whole period of time.”

The visit under the canopy wasn’t quite the same as their walks around the ponds in Hygiene, followed by a cup of coffee and checkers at the market or breakfast at the cafe. But just having face-to-face interaction allows the conversation to flow.

They reminisce about Shirley’s cabin in Estes Park where she lived before moving to Hover Community. There was the storm that took down a 175-foot ponderosa pine and squished her Subaru. “But we did sell it!” Shirley said with a laugh.

They talk about the bears, bighorn sheep and smaller critters that came by the cabin. “But mostly it was those silly squirrels!” she said.

Shirley said she missed seeing her sons in person. She recognized that this was a special day, “You know something is changing.”

The family is hoping those changes keep going in the right direction and that they can get back to starting and ending their visits with a hug.

Shirley talks about what it's been like during the pandemic lockdown in [this video](#) on the LHVC.com website.

CUTLINE: Shirley Olson has an in-person visit from her sons, John and Paul, at Hover Community Assisted Living in Longmont.

Photo by: Patricia Logan