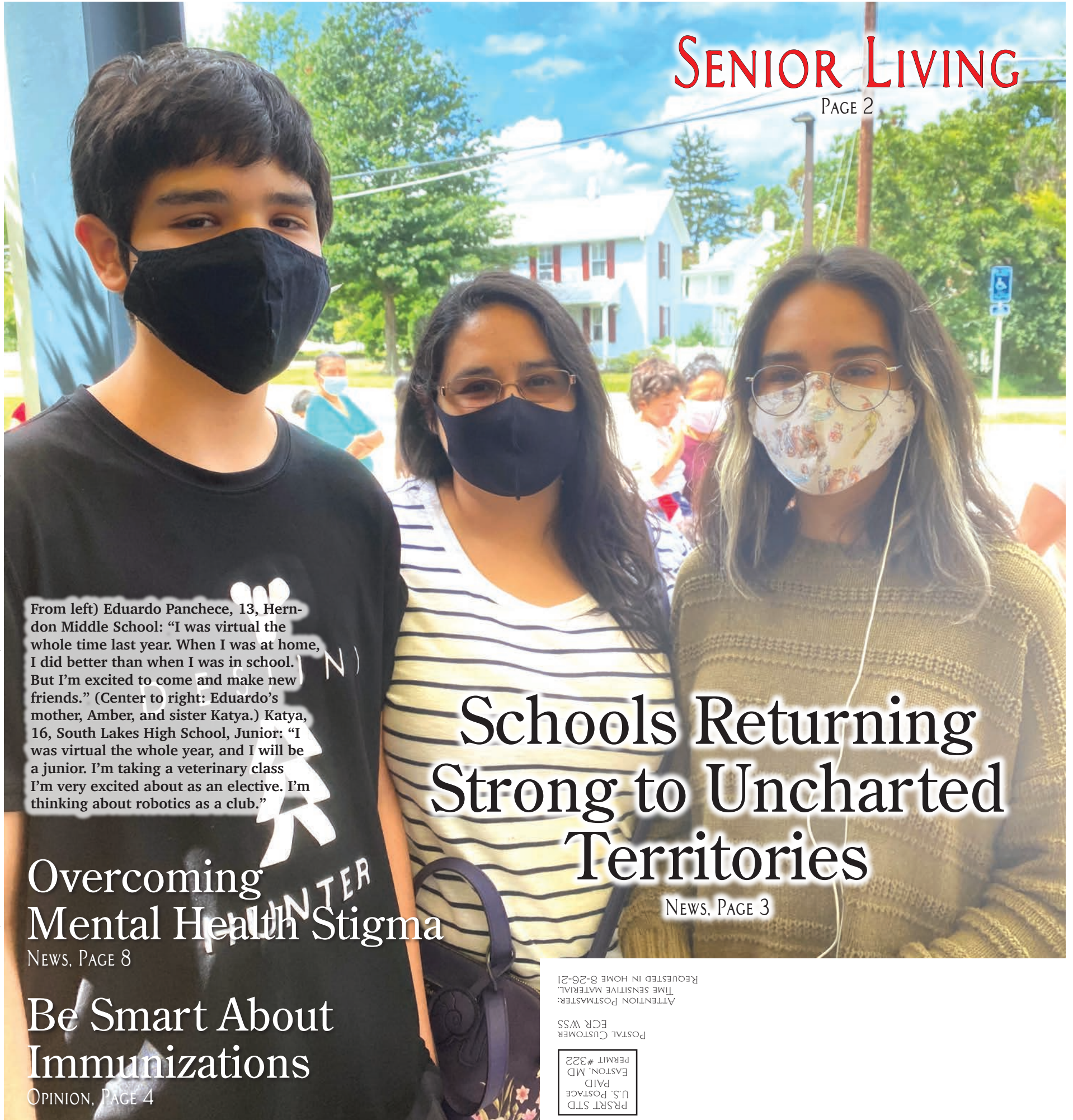


CONNECTION

Reston ♦ Oak Hill Herndon ♦ Chantilly ♦ CENTRE VIEW

SENIOR LIVING

PAGE 2



From left) Eduardo Panchece, 13, Herndon Middle School: "I was virtual the whole time last year. When I was at home, I did better than when I was in school. But I'm excited to come and make new friends." (Center to right: Eduardo's mother, Amber, and sister Katya.) Katya, 16, South Lakes High School, Junior: "I was virtual the whole year, and I will be a junior. I'm taking a veterinary class I'm very excited about as an elective. I'm thinking about robotics as a club."

Schools Returning Strong to Uncharted Territories

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Overcoming Mental Health Stigma

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Be Smart About Immunizations

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SENIOR LIVING

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE FAIRFAX COUNTY PARK AUTHORITY



Gardening and landscaping opportunities abound for seniors and retirees with a penchant for gardening.



Fairfax County Park Authority volunteers lead children's education programs at one of the county's history centers.



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Volunteering Can Give Seniors Purpose

Seniors and retirees can stay active and have a positive impact on the community.

BY MARILYN CAMPBELL
 THE CONNECTION



Seniors and retirees who enjoy fitness and aquatic pursuits might enjoy guiding those with disabilities during swimming and water exercise classes.

Every Tuesday this summer, Esther Rosenberg has welcomed two elementary school-aged students into her Potomac, Md. home. When they arrive, she offers them a snack and a stack of books. During their visit, Rosenberg reads to them and listens as they read to her. The students are the children of her housekeeper. As a former elementary school teacher, she enjoys sharing her love of reading with them.

"My children are adults now and I'm retired," she said. "I don't want to be a full-time teacher any more, but I love helping children who might not have access to books or a chance to practice reading over the summer."

Opportunities abound for seniors and retirees who want to volunteer their time to a cause they support or an interest they'd like to pursue. From gardening and landscaping to assisting those with disabilities during swimming and water exercise classes, there are a myriad of ways to help others locally.

"Civic engagement not only benefits a community, but certainly brings value to those individuals who offer their service," said Lisa Fikes, of Volunteer Arlington. "For seniors, volunteering is a wonderful way to stay active physically and mentally as well as gain a renewed sense of self and purpose."

Those with green thumb and a passion for gardening, might find pleasure as volunteer gardeners. Local park authorities use volunteers to maintain the grounds of recreational centers. Retirees with an interest in physical fitness or water sports can pursue their passion by serving as an aquatics assistant. Seniors who enjoy golf can volunteer their time to public courses by helping to maintain the course grounds and ensuring the timely start of play.

"Volunteering [allows for] meeting people with similar interests, being social and avoiding isolation," said Tammy Schwab, Education & Outreach Manager for the Fairfax County Park Authority's Resource Management Division. "Volunteers learn new skills which keeps their brain active and contributes to mental health. [It] can also increase physical activity which is so important these days as it is easier and easier to just stay home."

Seniors who want to offer services during a disaster or emergency situation or simply have a desire to improve healthcare in a local community can find fulfillment in serving in one of the area's Medical Reserve Corps (MRC).

Arlington, Fairfax and Montgomery counties and the City of Alexandria each have an Medical Reserve Corps. Volunteers receive training in public health, emergency and terrorism response, disaster mental health, CPR and First Aid.

"If you are retired, the Fairfax MRC would greatly benefit from your wealth of wisdom and experience, whether you have worked in the healthcare field or just want to be a positive force in the community," said Paula Rosca, Fairfax MRC

Program Coordinator. "By assisting in our vaccination clinics, teaching your neighbors about healthy living, or improving community emergency preparedness, your time will be well spent and much appreciated."

Rosenberg says that she benefits as much from the students she tutors as they do from her. "They bring me so much joy," she said. "They lift my spirits and give me a sense of purpose."


"For seniors, volunteering is a wonderful way to stay active physically and mentally as well as gain a renewed sense of self and purpose."

— Lisa Fikes, Volunteer Arlington

FOR MORE INFORMATION:


Volunteer Fairfax: volunteerfairfax.org

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Schools Returning Strong to Uncharted Territories

FCPS strives to stay ahead of delta enacting comprehensive prevention strategies to enable in-person learning 5-days a week.

BY MERCIA HOBSON
THE CONNECTION

Fairfax County Public Schools opened the doors of its 198 school buildings for the first day of the 2021-22 school year on Monday, Aug. 23. The tenth-largest school division in the United States responded to the latest uptick in COVID-19 Community Levels of Transmission with additional layered prevention strategies to work together to keep everyone healthy. Like other public schools across the Commonwealth, FCPS was required under SB 1303 to provide five-day-a-week instruction as directed by Virginia Governor Ralph Northam.

In the weeks before school opened, new data challenged original plans, and policy responses gained greater stringency. Updated science showed delta different than other variants of the COVID-19 virus. It was more than twice as contagious as previous variants, could carry 1,000 times the viral load as those infected with the original virus, and acted differently. Delta produced the same high amount of virus in both unvaccinated and fully vaccinated people, according to the CDC in Delta Variant: What We Know About the Science.

The COVID-19 level of community transmission has continued to escalate in Fairfax County but, as of Aug. 22, remained in third highest of four levels, at “substantial.”

RECKONING how best to ensure a safe start for school on Aug. 23 and mindful of the COVID-19 Delta variant, the school division put in place layered prevention strategies at all schools with recommendations for masks, screening for illness, cleaning and disinfecting, ventilation, contact tracing, quarantining and such.

FCPS’ earlier mask “recommendation” request for everyone, regardless of vaccination status, soared to requirement status on July 26. “Universal masking is a critical factor in ensuring all students can return to our buildings, especially when social distancing is not possible and not all our students are eligible yet for vaccinations,” said Scott S. Brabrand, Superintendent in a message to the FCPS Community.

On Friday, Aug. 20, with new data emerging and delta the predominant strain in the U.S., Brabrand sent another announcement addressed to FCPS Families and the Community. In it, Brabrand said, all FCPS employees will be required to be vaccinated against COVID-19 by the end of October or submit to routine negative COVID-19 tests.

“The requirement will go into effect in October, with additional details being rolled out in the coming weeks,” Brabrand said. With part-time staff included, there are more than 37,000 employees in the school district, making FCPS the third-largest employer in the state.

Fairfax County School Board Member Karl Frisch (Providence) applauded the decision. In a statement, Frisch said, “This was the right decision.” He added that to keep students safe and schools running smoothly, it was “critical that everyone in our community who is eligible gets vaccinated.” “Not only our educators and school employees. That is how we will



PHOTO BY MERCIA HOBSON/THE CONNECTION

Hundreds of Herndon Middle School families attended the Thursday afternoon Open House.

“Universal masking is a critical factor in ensuring all students can return to our buildings, especially when social distancing is not possible and not all our students are eligible yet for vaccinations.”

— Scott S. Brabrand, Superintendent, FCPS

ultimately put this pandemic behind us,” Fritsch said.

“Low vaccination coverage in many communities is driving the current rapid and large surge in cases associated with the Delta variant, which also increases the chances that even more concerning variants could emerge,” stated an update by the CDC dated August 19.

In the meantime, FCPS Employee News announced that elementary schools are providing seating charts to minimize the number of potential close contacts when masks are removed.

THE NEW PREVENTION STRATEGY for elementary students is in place because, generally, these students are not yet age-eligible for the vaccine.

Protocols for Potential Temporary COVID-19 Closures are in place to ensure continuity of learning in the event health authorities require such to protect the health of students, staff, and the community. Different student support services are offered during closures and hinge on the in-person closure type from individual student(s), individual teacher, class, school, and division.

FCPS noted: “For the 2021-22 school year, FCPS will not be using county metrics or transmission rates to adjust operating status. All decisions regarding closure of schools will be made at the direction of the county and state health officials and/or an Executive Order.”

Find out more about appointments for COVID-19 vaccinations or nearby pop-up clinics through the Fairfax County Health Department’s website.

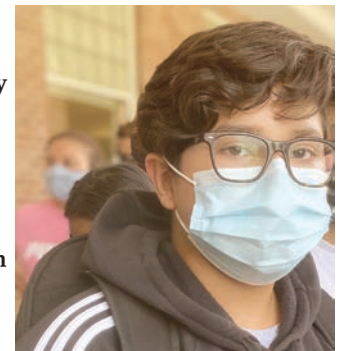
VIEWPOINTS

Students, Parents, Teachers: Excited About Being Back



Keneth Meza, 12, of Herndon, Herndon Middle School: “I’m excited about having a new teacher. I’ve never been in the building before. I’m afraid, though, of the older kids. They can be mean, and I’m not.” (Pictured with his mother Elvia, brother Jafet, 4, and Josias, 2.)

PHOTOS BY MERCIA HOBSON/THE CONNECTION



Max Chavarria, 13, Herndon Middle School: “I get to meet my teacher for AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination, a class where students are provided with study skills instruction, motivational activities, and college and career exploration). I’m looking forward to the class and want to work in construction.”



Cyara Kane, 12, Reston, Herndon Middle School with her mother, Vanessa: “I was virtual the whole year. I’ve never been in the building before. I’m scared of seeing my grades online instead of getting a quarterly report card like when I was in elementary school, but I’m excited about my electives. I chose theater and added AVID. It is a program that gets you ready for college. I want to be a lawyer.”

Justine Klena, Principal Herndon Middle School: “I’m very excited to be opening school this year. [At Thursday’s Open House] we had more parents in this building than I think we’ve had in years, and this is my 14th year. They were all here, all wearing masks, and very excited. You could see it in their eyes as they walked around the building. The teachers loved meeting the families. And what they did in one week; they’ve transformed this building to be ready for kids. We got lots of families for the Open House, probably 600 to 700 families.”



PHOTO FCPS

Be Smart About Immunizations

BY KENNETH R. "KEN" PLUM
STATE DELEGATE (D-36)



COMMENTARY

In elementary school I was given along with everyone else a stiff cardboard with ten slots that each held one thin dime. A dollar was a lot of money at the time, but everyone worked hard to fill their card that the March of Dimes assured us would provide money for research to end the feared disease of polio that was affecting more than 45,000 persons each year leaving many dead and others paralyzed. One of the most famous victims of the disease was Franklin Roosevelt who went on to become President of the United States four times even though he had to wear heavy leg braces to stand because of polio. In 1955 research and the aspirations of the March of Dimes paid off as Dr. Jonas Salk discovered a vaccine against polio. Children in Franklin Sherman Elementary School in McLean, were selected to kick off a nationwide Polio vaccine program aimed at finally eradicating what was one of the most dreaded diseases ever. The number of polio cases fell rapidly to

less than 100 in the 1960s and fewer than 10 in the 1970s and is now considered to be eradicated in this country.

There are many other instances where the discovery of vaccines has eradicated diseases. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention list fourteen such diseases with some more familiar than others: chicken pox, mumps, whooping cough, diphtheria, measles, flu, tetanus, rubella, and others. (<https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/parents/diseases/forgot-14-diseases.html>)

Governor Ralph Northam declared August to be Immunization Awareness Month in Virginia to recognize that "vaccines are proven to be an exceptionally safe method in preventing disease, as they are thoroughly tested before licensing and carefully monitored to ensure continued safety" and "to encourage all vaccines to be administered..." That encouragement is of course directed to those persons who have not taken one of the vaccines that provide protection against COVID-19 and its variants.

For those of us who lived through the polio threat and the other many childhood diseases that have been eliminated with vaccinations are left scratching our heads at the number of people who are taken in by the misinformation that has been spread about the COVID vaccines. In my mind the campaigns against the vaccines are immoral and can be easily shown to be dishonest. The latest surge of the Delta variant among persons who have not been vaccinated should provide proof of the importance of vaccination. An increasing number of bedside pleas from unvaccinated persons now nearing death who are advising others to get vaccinated may be enough to sway some of the hardest deniers.

The Virginia Department of Health has a wonderful website, <https://www.immunizevirginia.org/>, about immunizations with a schedule of ages when various vaccinations are to be administered. While many of these are for children and are necessary for school attendance, some such as tetanus and flu are advisable for adults. Seasonal flu shots are now available and should be taken in addition to a COVID-19 vaccination. As individuals and as a community, we need to be smart about vaccinations.

Taking that First Planned "Post-Pandemic" Overseas Trip

BY JOHN LOVAAS
COMMUNITY ACTIVIST AND FOUNDER OF RESTON FARMERS MARKET

INDEPENDENT PROGRESSIVE

One of our favorite pastimes since retiring from the travelling life of a Foreign Service Officer is...you guessed it...travelling overseas. Early last year, because of the Covid 19 pandemic we found ourselves having to shut down plans for two trips, to western and eastern Europe. Subsequently, we signed up for a cruise way in the future--beginning July 30, 2021. Surely the pandemic would be way back in our rearview mirror by then!

However, as our departure date drew near, it seemed an iffy proposition. But after completing a bevy of new forms as well as providing our CDC Covid vaccination certificates and proof of a negative Covid test two days before departure, we actually left Dulles Airport with our travelling companions enroute to a cruise from Malta to the Greek Islands.

Covid hung over us all the way. Masks were required in the airports and on both flights. When we landed in the port of Valletta, Malta, customs authorities asked to see our CDC vaccination certificates and two-page European Union forms filled with our personal data and health records.

Upon boarding our cruise ship, a new regimen took over. Again, we showed our CDC vaccination certificates and Covid test documentation. We were issued contact tracker medallions in order to go aboard. The trackers were hung around our necks to be worn everywhere we went-on board and ashore. We were also given a fresh supply of quality surgical masks to

be worn everywhere on the ship except while dining or in our cabin. Each evening our cabin steward dropped off plastic test tubes to be filled with our spit and turned in first thing each morning for daily Covid testing. The ship itself had space for 900+ passengers, but to facilitate social distancing, would carry only 450 on our cruise.

Otherwise life on board the ship was comfortable. It included: a pleasant cabin complete with a balcony for two; several restaurants serving a wide variety of dishes from meat and potatoes to more exotic fare such as typical Mediterranean cuisine; two swimming pools; and, a top deck for walking, miniature golf and chaise lounges for soaking up the sun. There were daily guest lecturers on history and culture of the region, and live musical entertainment each evening!

Shore experiences began with a full day in Malta where the temperature got to 104 degrees (F). Covid was there, too. Excursions on shore were strictly limited to walking or riding a bus with a local guide, all while masked. There was no free time to tour side streets, mingle with the local folk, or SHOP—to keep us safe from Covid! In Malta, sightseeing included a scenic bus tour of the island with its rich history in the center of the Mediterranean, and a walk through the ancient village of Mdina.

The ship's sailing from Malta was mysteriously delayed from early evening into the next morning. As we and others watched while waiting for the ship's cast off, a bizarre scene unfolded before our curious eyes. The pier area

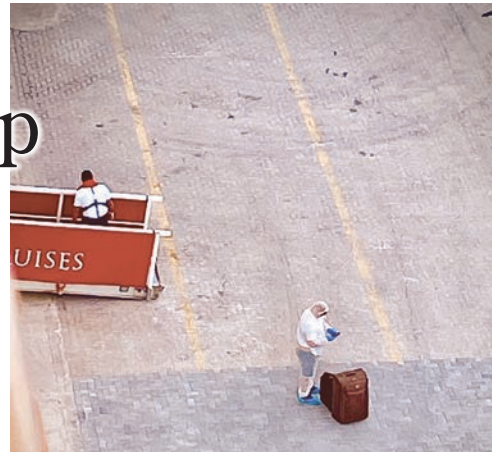


PHOTO BY JOHN LOVAAS

Lone man wrapped in plastic leaving our cruise ship. Man on the gangplank just sprayed it after the man walked down it.

beside the ship was empty... until a solitary man wrapped in clear plastic walked down the gangplank followed by two crewmen at a distance spraying the gangplank after him. The man then stood alone with his two bags until finally a car came for him. He placed his bags in the trunk, sat in the back seat, and was driven away. [See photos below] Those of us watching concluded he was likely a crew member who had tested positive for Covid.

Within the hour, the ship steamed away from the pier and we sailed the Ionian Sea to our first stop in Greece, the isle of Kalamata. Next, we had a couple of days in Athens, and sailed the Aegean to the spectacularly scenic isle of Santorini, followed by Rhodes, the legendary home of the Colossus and, finally to Crete, the largest of the Greek isles before sailing back to Malta (with everyone still being spit tested daily) and our flight home.

In a future column, perhaps there will be more about the fascinating places visited whose past includes the many great civilizations who occupied and ruled the Mediterranean Sea..

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NEWS DEPARTMENT:
reston@connectionnewspapers.com

Kemal Kurspahic
Editor ♦ 703-778-9414
kemal@connectionnewspapers.com

Mercia Hobson
Community Reporter
mhobson@connectionnewspapers.com

Bonnie Hobbs
Community Reporter, 703-778-9415
bhobbs@connectionnewspapers.com

Ken Moore
Contributing Writer
kmoore@connectionnewspapers.com

ADVERTISING:
For advertising information
sales@connectionnewspapers.com
703-778-9431

Debbie Funk
Display Advertising/National Sales
703-778-9444
debfunk@connectionnewspapers.com

David Griffin
Marketing Assistant
703-778-9431
dgriffin@connectionnewspapers.com

Classified & Employment Advertising
703-778-9431

Editor & Publisher
Mary Kimm
mkimm@connectionnewspapers.com
@MaryKimm

Executive Vice President
Jerry Vernon
703-549-0004
jvernon@connectionnewspapers.com

Managing Editor
Kemal Kurspahic
Art/Design:
Laurence Foong, John Heinly,
Ali Khaligh
Production Manager:
Geovani Flores

CIRCULATION
circulation@connectionnewspapers.com



Two People Rescued from Herndon Townhouse Fire

Home lost but lives saved in the two-alarm blaze.

BY MERCIA HOBSON
THE CONNECTION

Fairfax County Fire & Rescue Department says the electrical system of a motorcycle being charged by a trickle charger sparked a two-alarm fire after midnight on Aug. 17 at a townhome in Herndon. Two occupants had to be rescued by ladder from a second-floor balcony. One person was transported to the hospital with minor injuries.

At 12:56 a.m., Fairfax County Fire and Rescue units responded to a fire located in the 100 block of Fortnightly Boulevard in the Town of Herndon. Loudoun County Fire and Rescue assisted. Flames reportedly showed in the back of the three-story, middle unit townhouse when firefighters arrived. Two occupants could be seen at a second-floor window above the front door.

Fairfax County Fire and Rescue say a smoke alarm woke the occupants. Due to smoke conditions, they could not exit the house through the first floor. Herndon's crew from Engine 404 used a ladder to the second-floor balcony, where the residents moved and helped them out.



PHOTO BY MERCIA HOBSON/THE CONNECTION

In the days after the fire, signs of the fire's intense heat melting the third-floor siding are evident, along with roof buckling. A construction truck is visible in the driveway of the adjacent townhouse that experienced damage.

A second alarm was quickly requested and brought additional units, including the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority Fire and Rescue Department. Crews quickly attacked the fire to prevent extension to adjacent townhomes bringing it under control and eventually extinguished.

Damages resulting from the fire, not including two motorcycles and a car in the garage, were reported at approximately \$253,550. The fire displaced both residents of the home and resulted in water damage to adjacent townhomes. There were no firefighter injuries. Sadly, a cat was found deceased.

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PHOTOS BY MERCIA HOBSON/THE CONNECTION



Langston Hughes Middle School students on the first day of FCPS' 2021-22 school year. Above the students is an excerpt from Langston Hughes, "I, Too" from "The Collected Works of Langston Hughes."

Back to Langston Hughes Middle

— MERCIA HOBSON



Mehiret Tilahun, 12, Langston Hughes Middle School: "I'm most excited about learning. My dad is most concerned about me focusing on learning because this is a new school, and he wants me to be a great learner." Mehiret is pictured with her father, Elis Tilahun



Ismail Mohamed, 12, Langston Hughes Middle School: "I was most concerned about getting here on time. I'm most excited about new activities, and science is one of my interests. Asha Aden, Ismail's mother: "I'm concerned about his safety. I was on and off about this."



Josue Mezarina, 12, Langston Hughes Middle School: "I'm concerned about taking history because I need to learn more about the world. I think my mom probably wants me to be good at everything." From left -- Patricia Reyes, Josue's mother, Josue Mezarina, and Aimee Monticchio, Principal of Langston Hughes Middle School. Aimee Monticchio, Principal Langston Hughes Middle School: "This may be a year with many uncertainties, but we are certain that Langston Hughes Middle School will be an incredible place to learn and grow."

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"Enough Already"



By KENNETH B. LOURIE

As my late mother would have suggested after reading four consecutive weeks of Kenny's column being on the same subject: the second degree burns on my feet, I am finally moving on. Though my feet and mobility have not entirely returned to normal, I am nonetheless finished with this arc and am returning to my regular subject: cancer.

After being a cancer patient for so long now, it's easy to forget exactly what the side effects are for a particular medicine that you're presently taking versus one that you used to take. Granted, it's not rocket science, but it is confusing, especially after 12-plus years of treatment and having taken over a dozen different types of chemotherapy, targeted therapy, immunotherapy; most for lung cancer, some for thyroid cancer. Throw in that the patient (yours truly) is over age 65 and likely experienced a touch or two of "chemo brain" (a kind of memory loss brought on by chemotherapy) over the many years of treatment and before you can say alimta, avastin, tarceva and opdivo, you can't even distinguish one from the other. Considering these varying medicines kept you alive for a time, is a bit disconcerting at the least and really scary at the most. However, the bigger picture is that I'm still alive and whatever bumps and bruises I've experienced along the road, I'm still able to drive, if you know what I mean?

Nevertheless, it's important to stay current and aware of the likely side effects because not knowing/recalling them can lead to unnecessary and unhelpful worry: is this the cancer or some predictable side effect? Whatever makes this awareness/lack of awareness challenging is that the side effects vary from one treatment/medicine to the next and are not always consistent in their occurrence and/or intensity.

As an example, currently, I am experiencing shortness of breath. It is a side effect of lenvima, the thyroid cancer drug I'm taking daily. However, I haven't been as short of breath as I am now as I had been the previous few weeks. At least I know it's a side effect so I'm not freaking out. Still, is a side effect that was not happening, problematic, when nothing else (increased dosage) has happened? In fact, I've already had the dosage reduced twice from 24 mg to 10 mg primarily because I was too short of breath, and experienced a touch of dizziness/vertigo as well. The goal in deciding dosage, as I understand it/have been told, is to try and find the "sweet spot" where the minimal dosage results in the maximum benefit: controlled disease/no progression. And now, with my most recent cancer marker down to seven from a high of over 200 last year, the medicine certainly seems to be working. The dilemma is determining how much can the dosage be reduced before it allows the cancer to grow? My oncologist has always been concerned with quality of life so we've regularly adjusted doses depending on the results of lab work and my quarterly scans.

It seems silly to mess with success. And besides shortness of breath - to me, is a minor inconvenience considering the stakes. I just have to be aware and remind myself that a cancer diagnosis, especially one which started with a "13 month to two year" prognosis, is fraught with many challenges and inconsistencies. Sometimes, what's up is down and what's down is up. It's all very disorienting and if my life wasn't at risk, I might find this experience mildly amusing, even curious (as Data from "Star Trek: Next Generation" might say). But, on the contrary, my situation is as serious as a heart attack, which fortunately I've never suffered, thank God! I just hope if it does occur, I'll recognize the symptoms for what they are, rather than as a side effect of the medication I take for my thyroid cancer. What a mistake that would be. And I'd have no one to blame but myself. As a cancer patient, I have one key responsibility: pay attention to my body, and keep my eye on the ball.

Kenny Lourie is an Advertising Representative for The Potomac Almanac & The Connection Newspapers.



Supporters of the walk-a-thon gather for a group photo.



(From left) Shyamali Roy Hauth, 1st Vice-Chair of Democratic Asian Americans of Virginia, Robert Rigby, a teacher at West Potomac High School and an advocate for the rights of LGBT+ students and teachers, and School Board Member Melanie Meren (Hunter Mill District).

Overcoming Mental Health Stigma

Suicide Walk-a-Thon brings awareness.

BY MERCIA HOBSON
THE CONNECTION

The pandemic's psychological and socioeconomic fallout may be driving an accelerated trend in depressive symptoms and suicide ideation, attempts, and deaths in Fairfax County, reported experts in mental health at the "Fight Suicide" Walk-a-Thon at Lake Fairfax Park in Reston held Aug. 21. The need exists for the community to offer a hand to those who cannot ask for help or treatment.

Prolonged social distancing and self-isolation imposed by the pandemic are compounded by the daily burden of worries about family and self-employment, income falling, and Covid health and safety of loved ones. These concerns are raising the risk of mental health issues. Some individuals are at the breaking point into "darkness" and the "ultimate act," suicide, yet stigma and prejudice associated with reaching out for help stops them from doing so.

On Saturday, Aug. 21, the Family Counseling Center of Greater Washington located in Vienna hosted the "Fight Suicide" Walk-a-Thon. Partnered with the Fairfax Health Department, the event's purpose was to bring attention to mental health and the stigma that can be associated with it.

Daniel Park is the Executive Director of the Family Counseling Center of Greater Washington in Vienna. "Suicide is not a matter of personal concern. It is a matter of the community's responsibility," Park said. "This is why we must work together, especially for the Asian American community. It is not ready yet to speak about suicide because of stigma."

Cultural factors influence some Asian-Americans whether or not they seek access for behavioral or mental health concerns. Depending upon the individual's degree of acculturation, socioeconomic status, immigration status, and their given culture, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, et-



Gloria Addo-Ayensu, MD, MPH, is the Director of Health for Fairfax County.

cetera, these factors may influence whether individuals seek diagnosis and treatment or not.

Cindy Han, CEO of the Family Counseling Center of Greater Washington located in Vienna, said that the practice's primary purpose is to serve those with mental illnesses. It offers to counsel individuals experiencing life's serious challenges.

THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC crisis on suicidality appears related to the increase in mental health problems. Han said, "We have encountered many families who have lost their loved ones to suicide and families struggling with a family member contemplating suicide."

"A person dies by suicide every 11 minutes in the United States," said Han. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among teenagers, particularly many Korean teenagers who take their lives with suicide, according to Han.

Binbin Yang, Community Health Specialist with Fairfax County Health Department works with the Asian and Pacific Islander communities. "The American public is not aware that suicide is a national crisis," said Yang. "People seeking our mental health services have increased threefold since 2020 compared to 2019."

According to Yang, the impact of the pandemic is negatively compromising lives with



Daniel Park, Executive Director of the Family Counseling Center of Greater Washington in Vienna.

"anxiety, depression, and a sense of hopelessness." She said the purpose of the day's event was "to bring people from darkness out into the light."

Yang said, "Mental health is nothing to be ashamed of. It is no different than having any other bodily ailment that you go seek a specialist for a cure." Yang added that when people suffer, have challenges, they need to talk to others, so they do not go unnoticed.

"We want to be sure that it does not lead to the ultimate act. How devastating suicide is," Yang said.

Gloria Addo-Ayensu, MD, MPH, is the Director of Health for Fairfax County. She said that given the level of COVID transmission in the County and its isolation, people are not doing what they did previously. "When individuals have challenges with their mental health, isolation further exacerbates the problem... Silence fuels the stigma," said Addo-Ayensu.

School Board Member Melanie Meren (Hunter Mill District) said, "Mental health is just as important as physical health for our students and staff. This year we know that we must pay attention to the risk of suicide and listen to our students who are asking for help."

Robert Rigby is a teacher at West Potomac High School in Alexandria. He said that suicide touches LGBTQ+ students "very dearly." "I'm here to stand up for and represent all the students who are struggling and need someone to support them."

Shyamali Roy Hauth is the 1st Vice-Chair of Democratic Asian Americans of Virginia. According to Hauth, the Asian community needs to make sure they speak about suicide prevention. "Last week, we held a panel on mental health with the Democratic Asian Americans of Virginia...Speaking about mental illness, mental health, and suicide prevention is very important to our community."

GRACE NOH, 17, of Clifton, attended the walk-a-thon. According to Noh, the event was important to her because she knew people struggling with depression. "I thought this was a way to support them," she said.

Ester Lee, 17, of Centreville, said she saw a flier about the event and thought it a good way to connect. She, too, told of a friend who had been struggling with depression.

Sophia Yu, 13, of Springfield, came to the walk-a-thon with her mother. Sophia said what she learned that day was that someone in the United States dies by suicide every eleven minutes. Asked what she might do if she felt negatively overwhelmed, Sophia said, "I would talk to somebody, someone I was close to, if I felt sad or depressed."

Gabriel Yu, 11, of Springfield, said that he learned teenagers were "dying by suicide." "If I felt depressed, I would talk with my mom or dad."

Thomas Rayner's father died by suicide. While not a mental health expert but holding personal knowledge, Rayner said, "When people get into that space, they don't see any other alternatives. They don't think about the impact they have on people around them and their loved ones. It's not that they're selfish, but they just can't think of another way."

Anthem HealthKeepers Plus, one of the event sponsors, offers Medicaid and FAMIS (Family Access to Medical Insurance Security Plan, the Virginia health insurance program for children). Open enrollment runs through Aug. 31.