

Couple in 90s defy COVID-19



Barbara Kuhn, left, and Blaine Kuhn talk to their son Steve Kuhn through a window at Prestige Senior Living Orchard Heights in Salem on June 3. CONNOR RADNOVICH/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Barbara and Blaine Kuhn conquer coronavirus at hard-hit senior living facility in West Salem

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The test was positive. Barbara Kuhn had COVID-19, the deadly virus that spread like northwest wildfire in the senior living facility where she lives in West Salem.

Her husband Blaine's test was negative, though, presenting a dilemma for their family.

Officials at Prestige Senior Living Orchard Heights recommended Barbara be quarantined, moved out of the suite she's called home for four years and separated from the man she's adored for more than seven decades.

The Kuhn children knew neither would be happy separated and that it would be especially devastating for their mom, who has dementia and is dependent on their dad.

And it was hard for them to believe he didn't have COVID-19, because their parents sit for hours on their loveseat, holding hands, and sleep in the same bed. They felt it was just a matter of time, so they kept them together.

Blaine eventually tested positive. The family received the results just a couple of days after his 95th birthday. Barbara is 96.

COVID-19 has been particularly lethal for older people. Of the 159 Oregonians who have died from the virus, 115 have been 70 or older and another 33 were in their 60s.

The risks are elevated at assisted living and memory care facilities, where the most vulnerable live in close quarters. State health records list Orchard Heights as the second hardest-hit congregate care community in Oregon, with 53 confirmed resident and staff cases and 10 deaths.

The family's biggest worry was that Blaine would die before Barbara.

Meet Ward and June Cleaver

Blaine and Barbara met at the University of Washington. She was a member of Delta Zeta Sorority. He was a houseboy in the sorority kitchen.

His college education had been interrupted by World War II. He served in the Navy and was a radioman on the USS Hamul in Okinawa, Japan. He returned to school in the fall of 1946.

The two didn't date until after Barbara graduated. A friend set them up on a blind date. And on that date, or at least one of their first dates, Barbara was a bit too vain to wear her glasses. According to family lore, they were gazing over Puget Sound and she remarked, "Look at those two seagulls out on that log."

It turns out the seagulls were people and the log a boat.

Blaine said it was "pretty much" love at first sight for him.

They were married on June 11, 1950. Barbara worked at the FBI in Seattle while Blaine finished his degree. He landed a job with the Boy Scouts of America, Chief Seattle Council, and soon they started a family.

The Kuhns had two girls and a boy. Suzanne and Sarah were born in Seattle. Steve was born in Beaverton after Blaine

accepted a position with the Portland Area Council.

The family moved to Salem in 1968, when Blaine took an executive job for the council including Marion, Polk and Linn counties. The children were school age, ranging from 10 to 16.

The couple has been jokingly referred to as Ward and June Cleaver, America's ideal couple and perfect parents on TV in the 1950s and 1960s.

"Mom did wear an apron, but she never wore pearls," daughter Sarah Dalke said.

Now that she and her siblings are older, with children and grandchildren of their own, they appreciate how nurturing their parents were — just like the Cleavers.

"Our family was just kind of reminiscent of those values," daughter Suzanne Witter said. "I don't think you realize when you're living it how fortunate you are and how other kids don't have wonderful childhoods and wonderful parents."

Giving back in retirement

Blaine and Barbara are well known in Salem for their community service. He retired as an executive with the Boy Scouts in 1985. She taught for several years at Hayesville Elementary and tutored students at home.

Both were Master Gardeners and involved with First Christian Church and the Bush School Reading Program.

He was active in Salem Rotary Club, serving as club secretary for 18 years through the 1990s. It's been said that every potential president-elect during his tenure first made certain Blaine would continue to be club secretary before he or she committed.

Barbara was active in the Salem Hospital Auxiliary.

The couple moved into the assisted living section at Orchard Heights in 2015, then transferred into memory care the following year.

Their family visits often. Their two daughters and their husbands live in Salem, and their son and his wife live in Beaverton. Most of their eight grandchildren are nearby, too. They also have eight great-grandchildren.

Visits, of course, have been much different over the past three months because of the pandemic. In-person now means visiting through the window.

"It's such an unsatisfying feeling not being able to hug them or hold their hand," Suzanne said. "Talking through the window just doesn't quite hack it."

They're thankful Blaine and Barbara have a ground-floor unit, which makes those visits easier. But hearing can be a challenge for their parents, so they get creative. Steve Kuhn and his wife, Gwen, bring a dry erase board to aid the conversation.

A photograph taken from inside Blaine and Barbara's room shows them sharing this recent message: "The whole family sends you love. We miss hugging you!"

Coming down with the virus

The COVID-19 outbreak came to a



Barbara and Blaine Kuhn on their wedding day June 11, 1950 in Port Angeles, Washington. SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

head in the first two weeks of May, when the number of cases doubled and management tested all residents.

Barbara was among the first group to test positive. Her primary symptoms were extreme fatigue and lack of appetite. She could barely stay awake during the day.

Blaine was starting to exhibit some of the same symptoms by the time another round of tests was done. By then, eight of the 11 rooms in the memory care section had positive cases, according to the family, and two of the rooms were empty.

"Once it hits, you're totally helpless," Suzanne said. "There's not a dang thing you can do to try to help them."

Neither of her parents experienced respiratory issues or had a high fever.

But the family remained worried about how the virus would impact Blaine, who has congestive heart failure and a history of respiratory infection in his lungs dating back to childhood.

All 159 people in Oregon who have died of COVID-19 have had underlying health conditions. State health officials do not specify what conditions when deaths are announced, but the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lists chronic lung disease and serious heart conditions among seven conditions that can increase risk.

The family came to grips with the fact that their parents would probably die. They figured if one went, the other would go soon after, and they worried most about him dying first.

"We were all saying 'my gosh they're 95 and 96, but to all the sudden be face with it ...'" Suzanne said. "We're a faith-based family, we're confident where they're going, but I really

wasn't sure that this was how I wanted them to go."

Then Barbara began to improve. She gradually regained stamina and her appetite. But it's taken longer for Blaine, who lost 14 pounds.

At one point, the family pressed Prestige officials to have him further examined. A nurse responded that same day and reported to the family that Blaine looked better than the last time she had seen him, and he had eaten some food.

"I think he's starting to turn a corner," the nurse told them.

Blaine has since regained strength, although not the weight he lost. During a recent visit, he and Barbara seemed healthy and happy despite a columnist and photographer interrupting afternoon visits from all three of their children.

Blaine struggled to describe what being sick with COVID-19 was like.

"That's a hard question to answer," he said, wearing a mask and visiting through the screen of an office window. "I just didn't feel well. It didn't feel that different (from other illnesses)."

The Kuhns, who celebrate their 70th wedding anniversary on Thursday, are proof the coronavirus isn't necessarily a death sentence for someone in their 90s.

"That would give me hope that not everyone of their age is going to get real sick, be hospitalized and on a ventilator," son Steve Kuhn said.

"Forward This" taps into the heart of the Mid-Valley — its people, history, and issues. Contact columnist Capi Lynn at clynn@StatesmanJournal.com or 503-399-6710, or follow her on Twitter @CapiLynn and Facebook @CapiLynnSJ.