

Mahjong days bring friends together again

By TOM HALLMAN JR.
The Oregonian

Only now do four Portland women know they'd taken for granted something created long ago. Losing it for more than a year because of the coronavirus pandemic allowed them to discover that truth.

For 15 years they've been meeting twice a month to play mahjong. Invented in China in the 1800s, the game uses domino-like tiles with Chinese symbols and characters. Once a player gets the hang of it, the game is relatively simple. That leaves the women time to engage in trash talk — the gentle kind you'd expect when old friends gamble a few bucks over the course of four hours — while having fun and simply being with each other.

Then came the pandemic, which began closing down schools, offices, restaurants and all kinds of in-person entertainment. The twice-monthly mahjong game also fell victim to the insidious virus.

The players, who range from in age from 69 to 84, took the virus seriously. At their age they were considered high risk. If they became infected, they could get sick, or even die. At first, they thought the pause would be temporary. Then one month turned into another, and finally, into more than a year. Oh, they kept in touch over the telephone, but it just wasn't the same. Recently — all vaccinated — they reached out to each other and decided it was time to start again.

"I realize just why these friendships are so important," said Peggie Irvine-Page, 81. "Isolation was disappointing and hard. It made me realize it is the little things that get a person through the tough times."

The group rotates between members' homes. The first game of 2021 took place at Maryann Bozigar's place in northeast Portland. At 69, she describes herself as the baby of the group. The woman all arrived with their tiny, almost doll-size, purses where they carry the quarters they use to bet.

"We maybe spend \$3 dollars during a session," she said. "But over the year these quarters just move around from person to person."

Bozigar said her mother, gone 11 years now, taught her how to play mahjong.

"We have a blast together," she said. "A couple of these women are very funny. This group has been there through the good times and bad times we all have. We share stories about ourselves, our kids and our grandkids."

Mary Beth Young, 77, said when she first started playing with the group she had to concentrate on the tiles and the score card, which looks intimidating — FF 111 222 333 is but one example — to the uninitiated.

"I was so exhausted at the end of the games that when I got home, I couldn't even watch 'Antiques Roadshow' on TV," she said. "It took that much energy. It's easier now. It's a bit of skill and a bit of luck. I build on the luck."

By its very nature, she said, mahjong is, for the most part, a game for people with time on their hands. The women in this group are retired. Only one is married. The others have been single or widowed for years.

"No 30-year-old is going to play this," Young said. "I didn't. We were busy raising



Photos by Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian
ABOVE: Friends Peggie Irvine-Page, Kathy Tweedy, Maryann Bozigar and Mary Beth Young play mahjong. **TOP:** The friends play the game regularly.

a family, trying to buy a home and working. Older women, where the family is gone, need something to fill the hours. My daughters are 51 and 55. They encourage me to be part of 'Mahjong Day.' They don't want me on their doorstep."

With the game halted, the friends kept in touch with each other on the phone and dropped off small gifts for each other — masked up and at a great distance — during Christmas. But it just wasn't the same as gathering around a table.

They understood the need to wait. Across the United States, nearly 600,000 people have died from COVID-19. The daily news, since reports of that first infection in 2020, has been grim.

"The virus reminded those of us at this mahjong table of our mortality," Young said. "It's our age. It's unspoken. We all push it away, but it is there. This group will not go on forever. We all die. My life is moving on. At any funeral you cry for the loss of a friend, but also because you know you are next."

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Kathy Tweedy, who at 84 is the oldest member of the group, enjoys the routine, the date on the calendar, twice a month, that invigorates her spirit.

"It's a positive afternoon," she said. "Everyone has a different opinion about current events and other issues. But we speak our minds. Being at that table is a safe place to be ourselves."

In the end, it is just a game, a simple game played twice a month around a table, four women laughing and talking and wagering a few quarters. But sometimes the simple moments in life are the best.

"Being back at the table is such a relief," Tweedy said. "It's like coming home again."

Phone program offers comfort to isolated seniors

By KYLE SPURR
The Bulletin

Carol Allison looks forward to her weekly calls from a friend she's never met.

The 85-year-old writer and illustrator in Madras has talked regularly over the phone for the past three months with Kelli Bradley, a volunteer with Caring Connections, a program that connects volunteers with seniors experiencing isolation through the coronavirus pandemic.

"I just thought it would be fun to do that and meet somebody new and talk," Allison said. "Since I live by myself."

Allison, who moved from Portland to Madras in 1956, has lived alone since her husband died of cancer in the mid-1960s. But she is not as lonely as other seniors. She has three sons, including one in Madras, and nine grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren.

Still, Allison lights up when she talks with Bradley, a Sunriver resident who works in consulting and owned an in-home care company for several years. The two talk for hours about cooking, computer problems and how much central Oregon has changed since Allison arrived.

They both feel grateful they were matched through the program.

"It helps people and it brings people together," Allison said. "I think it would be great for elderly people who can't get out or don't have anything at home to keep them busy."

Denise LaBuda, director of communications for the Council on Aging of Central Oregon, said the council started the Caring Connections program last fall. The organization started to notice seniors were more isolated than usual due to the pandemic. More than 50 seniors across the region signed up for the program.

"It was pretty clear people were growing less connected," LaBuda said.

For many of the seniors, the phone call from a volunteer is the only social interaction they get each week, LaBuda said. The phone calls are also a way to check on a senior and make sure they are staying healthy, she said.



Carol Allison, 85, of Madras, with her 20-year-old parrot, 'Missy.'

Dean Guernsey/The Bulletin

Social isolation was an issue for seniors even before the pandemic, LaBuda said. National studies identified loneliness in seniors as a growing epidemic with higher health risks than obesity or smoking. An AARP study found one-third of seniors nationwide reported feeling a lack of companionship. LaBuda believes the same is true locally.

"It's not that this was new," LaBuda said. "COVID just made it all worse."

The group hopes to grow the Caring Connections program beyond the pandemic.

The program recently received a \$137,837 grant from the Central Oregon Health Council. And the program is also using a software system to collect statistics on the number, frequency and duration of phone calls. The information will then be analyzed by the Oregon Health & Science University Community Research Hub

to understand the effect of the weekly calls.

LaBuda said the program may soon expand to in-person visits as well.

"We already have volunteers who would like to go see the people," LaBuda said. "They would like to meet them when it gets safe and build a friendship in person."

Bradley signed up for the program three months ago and was matched with Allison. Bradley has experience caring for seniors through her business, The Devoted Daughter, which offers resources for professional caregivers and those caregiving for a family member.

"This is kind of in my wheelhouse," Bradley said. "I saw the ad and thought I can do this. It's not a big deal. I called and said I'd love to help if I can."

Every time Allison answers the phone, Bradley can tell she is smiling.

"She is very positive. She's always

happy," Bradley said. "She has lots of interesting stories. Although we come from different backgrounds, we always find things to chit chat about. I think it's good for both of us."

The weekly phone calls often turn into productive conversations. A couple weeks ago, Allison was writing a story for her grandson and needed help giving the characters names. Bradley helped Allison come up with ideas.

"It's just good to be able to help her, and I enjoy it," Bradley said.

After three months, Bradley feels like she knows Allison on a personal level. She would be able to tell if something was wrong with Allison. The weekly calls offer comfort for them both.

"We spend hours on the phone," Bradley said. "I would be worried if she was down in the dumps. That's not her."