



COVID-19: Senior citizens' day-to-day lives, routines affected by outbreak



FILE PHOTO Theresa Bury Van Maerssen teaches a Sit and Be Fit class at Edgemont Park House in December 2019. Senior activities are among the events in Montclair disrupted by COVID-19.

By ERIN ROLL

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With the COVID-19 outbreak shuttering schools and disrupting senior events in Montclair, community groups and organizations are working to ensure that Montclair's vulnerable populations don't fall further into need.

The township began canceling senior activities, including events at the Edgemont House, last week. The Montclair Film Festival also called off its film screenings for seniors during the month of March, and the Montclair Institute for Lifelong Learning (MILL) has also suspended classes and events.

The township is working on arranging outreach programs to make sure senior citizens' needs are met, including needs for socialization: "Township staff members are working with volunteers to arrange for regular phone contact with our more vulnerable program attendees to ensure their well-being. The township is also exploring possibilities for remote programming via television, the internet and telephone," the announcement said.

Toni's Kitchen will be providing assistance to seniors, and families whose children rely on free and reduced-price meals at school.

Toni's Kitchen will provide groceries to 80 seniors identified as at-risk by the Senior Services Department in Montclair. The Kiwanis Club of Montclair will be coordinating driving for the weekly service until senior programming is back to its regular schedule, according to a Toni's Kitchen announcement sent out on Friday, March 13.

Toni's Kitchen Officials are urging residents to keep an eye out for their neighbors, especially neighbors who are in a vulnerable situation. "Please look out for your neighbors. Some families that were stable last week might be in need next week. We are here to help. Please don't hesitate to reach out."

On social media, members of the community encouraged each other to reach out to senior citizens they knew, whether they were friends, neighbors or relatives, and offer to do grocery shopping or run errands for them.

Abraham Dickerson said he was arranging to deliver groceries to some of his neighbors, and to check in on them.

Among them is Adeleri Onisegun. Onisegun, a psychologist who teaches at Bloomfield College, said she made the decision to practice social distancing due to the outbreak: a decision made easier by the college being on spring break. She decided to have groceries and other items delivered to her home rather than going to the store. She had tried having deliveries through apps, and wasn't pleased with the results, so she was pleased when Dickerson offered to pick up groceries for her.

It is important, said Onisegun, people not become mentally isolated. She said she keeps in touch with her daughter and grandchildren by phone regularly, and with members of her sorority.

In a situation such as the outbreak, Onisegun said, "It really calls for thinking about life," and it is a reminder of how valuable relationships are between people.

Toni's Kitchen will also be providing bags of groceries each week to families whose children rely on free and

reduced-price lunch. This will be in addition to the school district's food service vendors providing lunches for pickup for eligible families.

The closing of schools had led to concerns over families who depend on free or reduced school meals.

Toni's Kitchen is in need of donations of shelf-stable food, including oatmeal, peanut butter and pasta. The kitchen has also requested financial donations, since it will be purchasing large amounts of cleaning supplies.

Volunteers are also needed to drive deliveries around town, and to do short food preparation shifts at the kitchen.

People who are interested in donating food or money, or who would like to volunteer, may reach out through the kitchen's website or through toniskitchen@gmail.com.

The COVID-19 outbreak has far-reaching effects for Montclair's senior citizens.

People over the age of 60 are deemed to be particularly susceptible to COVID-19 and the novel coronavirus. All three of Montclair's identified cases, as of March 13, are over the age of 60, ranging in age from 60 to 77.

The Human Needs Food Pantry already offers food deliveries at about 230 food deliveries each week.

The Human Needs Food Pantry is now limiting visitors to small groups, and anyone who is exhibiting flu-like symptoms is asked to stay away, and send someone else to make deliveries or to pick up items. The pantry has also requested that children not enter the pantry building on Label Street, both to protect clients and to protect children as well. Staff will continue to use surgical gloves when handling food, and hand sanitizers are stationed throughout the building. The building is also being cleaned and sanitized on a regular basis. The pantry has also temporarily instituted a no-handshake policy: "Though we love to express our gratitude for your support, the practices of handshakes will be temporarily suspended," Executive Director Mike Bruno said in a message to the community. "We will also try to take the donations from you outside of our building to minimize the number of people entering."



In brief: Edgemont House gets much needed upgrades



Health and Human Services Director Sue Portuese, Acting Township Manager Timothy Stafford, Township CFO Padmaja Rao, Mayor Shown are: Robert Jackson, Acting Township Purchasing Agent Ray Carnevale and his wife Donna. COURTESY MONTCLAIR TOWNSHIP

The latest improvements of air conditioning at Edgemont Park House were unveiled on Aug. 8 with a small gathering of public officials, township staff and local senior citizens.

The facility became the home for senior programming in 2012. Other improvements include painting the building's interior by a local Boy Scout troop, replacing the flooring, installing new doors, windows and security locks; and the installation of new hot water heaters; electrical upgrades; and replacing the leaking roof.

Further improvements to be made include new plumbing and lighting, and the overhaul of the kitchen with new appliances and equipment, which will allow for cooking and baking demonstrations.



In brief: Edgemont Park House to be closed for HVAC repairs



*Edgemont Park improvements to the entrance and parking.
ADAM ANIK/ FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL*

Edgemont Park House will be closed Thursday, July 25 and Friday, July 26, due to the installation of a new HVAC system. All programs will be cancelled. Township officials said it is possible that the house could be closed on Monday, July 29, as well.

The Edgemont House is used for senior programs throughout the year.



Music: Terry's Serendipity Café nurtures art



Montclair High School students meet every Wednesday to plan monthly shows. COURTESY SAM SCHUMAN

Serendipity performance:

Saturday, Feb. 9, 7 p.m.

[Bnai Keshet](#)

99 South Fullerton Ave.

By SAM SCHUMAN

For Montclair Local

Montclair High School students begin to trickle into the Edgemont Park House at 6 p.m. on Wednesday, Jan. 9, just as they do every week for Terry's Serendipity Café staff meetings. Once the group of nearly a dozen staff members has assembled, they begin to plan the next installment of the monthly concert series that provides young artists in Montclair with a safe and supportive performance environment.

Over its 24-year history, the organization — popularly known as simply “Serendipity” — has given students an avenue to chase their passions, leading many to attend top-ranked colleges and for some pursue music professionally.

Gold Carson, one of two MHS seniors on staff, will attend Williams College this fall. Carson is a student representative on the National Steering Committee of the Student/Farmworker Alliance, an organization that they became involved with through Serendipity, which frequently uses its concerts to raise money for nonprofit organizations like SOFIA and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project. For the senior, music and activism are two sides of the same coin.

“It’s really just about respecting people,” Carson said. “That’s the baseline of what Serendipity is and what

political action is.”

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[READ: MONTCLAIR THEATER PROJECT; SUMMER STOCK, MEET POP-UP](#)

Aidan Champeau, the other senior staff member, has committed to Wesleyan University.

“I feel like I can find a lot of different communities [there] that I wasn’t able to really find at Montclair High besides Serendipity,” Champeau said.

Champeau and Carson, who each write and perform their own music, said that their experience with Serendipity led them to pick colleges that combined academic rigor with strong arts communities.

While Serendipity hosts spoken-word art and music of all genres, it maintains a certain punk-inspired do-it-yourself ethic. The group is entirely self-supported, offsetting the cost of booking performance spaces through ticket and snack sales, and the renting out of its audio equipment. Concerts are student-run, from sound and lighting to working the door, and run on the motto “no alcohol, no drugs, no ‘phobes,” the latter highlighting the group’s inclusivity.

Officially a project of the town’s Department of Recreation and Cultural Affairs, Serendipity was founded in 1995 when Montclair student Terry Bynum-Copeland requested that students be given a safe space to perform live music as a way to build community after a shooting at the Watchung post office that left four dead.

When Bynum-Copeland died of complications from epilepsy several months after Serendipity Café’s founding, the organization was renamed in his memory.

“It’s really satisfying to watch the kids actually put on the show themselves. Find the bands, run the shows, carry the equipment, everything,” said Ed Carine, who is one of two adult staff members and the only volunteer who has remained involved with Serendipity since its first year. “It’s great to watch them gain confidence and skills.”

Mike Berlin, an adult volunteer, provides crucial logistical support to Serendipity. Berlin, a former schoolteacher, became involved with Serendipity about ten years ago after his two daughters volunteered with the group.

“I was really inspired by what Ed was doing. I watched the effect it had on my kids and the effect on other kids ... I felt that what he was doing was a good contribution to society,” said Berlin. Berlin helps Carine and the Serendipity staff transport light and sound equipment from Carine’s house to Serendipity’s performance venue every month—“about a ton and a half of equipment,” he estimated.

Serendipity volunteers must set up the equipment before the concert starts, and are responsible for breaking down the equipment and transporting it back to Carine's house at the end of the night.

"We have the whole thing down to a pretty smooth-working system," Berlin said.

Like other volunteers, Berlin values Serendipity for what it provides its student volunteers and performers.

"A lot of your career in music is luck, but you need a chance to express yourself. You need a place to get started. You need a place where people will support you and make you feel important and valued, and Serendipity does that," he said. "They [students] are the stars of this organization, and I think that's what makes it so unique."



Dan Harris, left, performs with Shallow Alcove at the December show at Terry's Serendipity Café. COURTESY SAM SCHULMAN

SERENDIPITOUS FUTURE

Serendipity has inspired several recent MHS graduates to study music in college.

Claire Parcels played their first show at Serendipity with the band Tula Vera as a freshman in high school in 2014. Since then, Tula Vera has released an EP and full-length album, and played shows at Asbury Park's Stone Pony, Montclair Center Stage, and New York City's ABC No Rio.

Parcels is currently a first-year student at SUNY Purchase's Conservatory of Music, where they are majoring in studio composition. They credit Serendipity, along with lessons at Montclair's School of Rock, with preparing them to study music professionally. "A lot of people I meet now talk about how it was really hard starting out with a band because there was nowhere to play... Serendipity set me up to be a DIY musician," they said.

Daniel Harris, a 2017 MHS graduate, knew by his junior year of high school that he wanted a career in music. He played at Serendipity at least 20 times, by his own estimation, in addition to other venues in and around Montclair including The Bitter End in Greenwich Village. "It gives you something to be excited about. It gives you a reason to try really hard," said Harris.

As a result of his live music experience, Harris was admitted to the Bandier Program, a music industry program at Syracuse University's Newhouse School of Public Communications, where he continues to play music as a member of the band Shallow Alcove.

Greg Pason, one of two adults on Serendipity's staff, and the founder of Montclair Makes Music Day, isn't surprised to see Serendipity alumni make such impressive accomplishments.

"You see kids come in when they're freshmen, very shy and not confident, and by the time they're seniors they're leading," he said. "It serves such an incredible purpose."

Serendipity has already helped launch more than a few bona fide indie rock stars. Pinegrove, a Montclair band with several Serendipity alumni, recently released its second album, and has already sold out dates in

Cleveland, Chicago and Nashville for an upcoming tour in February. Forth Wanderers, another band formed by MHS alums, released its self-titled debut on famed indie label Sub Pop last year. Other artists who have performed at Serendipity include Alex G, Adult Mom, Screaming Females and Vampire Weekend founder Ezra Koenig.

Aidan Feliciano graduated from MHS in 2010, and has since toured the US and Europe with Pinegrove and electronic pop group Half Waif. Feliciano was born into a family of musicians, but it wasn't until eighth grade that he was introduced to indie rock at a Serendipity concert. "I remember thinking 'this is so crazy. I've never done this,'" he said.

Feliciano moved back to Montclair, and has attended several Serendipity concerts since returning. At the event's Open Mic in December, he performed two new songs he had written. "The reason I stopped touring was that I started having crazy anxiety. It [Serendipity] has been a really cool way for me to heal in a lot of ways, and be somewhere where I'm not being judged," he said. "When you leave Montclair, you learn that people do not have anything like that where they're from, and how rare something like Serendipity is."

At the Jan. 9 staff meeting, there is little talk of college applications or music stardom — the staff are focused on their upcoming show, planned for 7 p.m. on Feb. 9 at Bnai Keshet. One student has already booked a full bill of artists to perform and designed a promotional flyer for the show earlier that day during history class.

Morgan Godsil, a 10th-grade staff member, shared what makes Serendipity special to her:

"The most important part of Serendipity is that there's an art and creative community that I've become more involved in. It's the first time I've had access to other artists."



Compromise: Edgemont could get 6 parking

spots in response to senior outcry



Edgemont Park improvements to the entrance and parking lot.
ADAM ANIK/ FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

By Tina Pappas
for Montclair Local

The town is investigating the possibility creating six parking spots at Edgemont Memorial Park after seniors lobbied the town over the lack of parking with the new configuration of the driveway and loss of the parking area.

Earlier in the year, the 15.5-acre Edgemont Memorial Park underwent a \$900,000 upgrade, which included a new parking area in front of the house, decorative benches, gas-like lights, widened paths, two new water fountains and the planting of 30 trees.



The plan with the six spots added.

But in March, the seniors who use the Edgemont House as the township's only current senior program facility discovered plans called for the parking lot to be aesthetically overhauled, from a blacktopped square to a curved, Belgium-block-lined driveway and grassy areas. Seniors learned then that the driveway would allow for parallel parking only along the curve which seniors said would be too difficult to maneuver. They were also concerned with safety issues getting from their cars to the building with no sidewalks. Although the former parking lot did not have delineated spaces, seniors claim there were about 20 parking spots.

The council had maintained the renovations enhanced the green space which is foremost a park. Seniors however, have been attending meetings contending the town was responsible for providing parking for the approximately 400 seniors who use the facility monthly. They called for 25 parking spots.

Last month after 25 seniors attended the council meeting, a committee was formed with council members Rich McMahon, Robert Russo and Renée Baskerville, who later visited the park and came up with the compromise of six additional spots.

"We didn't hear about the new parking configuration until March 19, after breaking ground on the lot," said Ann Lippel, Chairman of the Montclair Senior Citizen Advisory. "We welcome the upgrades of the park, but no one reached out to us in a timely manner."

At the June 26 council meeting, several seniors spoke during the public comment portion requesting not only more parking but also more barrier-free access.

Senior Patricia Kenshaft said the current parking conditions are “drastic and undermine public participation” at the house.

Belinda Plutz said the lack of parking was not only inconvenient for seniors, but for families with small children as well.

“There just simply isn’t enough parking. We need more parking, we need more access,” Plutz said.

Virginia Cornue said the town should seek both beauty and function.

Although he originally thought green space should be preserved, Russo said he did find parking problems.

“There is a parking deficit I believe, and there is parking difficulty, especially with seniors like myself,” Russo said.

Plans call for the six spaces to be added along the curve across from the house.

“This would be a compromise solution,” he said.

Russo emphasized that Edgemont Memorial Park should be considered a park, not a senior center. A permanent senior center should be sought out, he added.

Lippel agreed that there should be an official senior citizen center located elsewhere in town other than the park.

“We’ve been lobbying for a senior center somewhere in Montclair, but that does not negate the fact that the park house will still be offering programs for seniors,” Lippel said.

Baskerville felt the additional parking spaces would not take away from aesthetics. She recommended designating four of the six spaces for handicapped accessibility, including further renovations to the ramp/drop-off area. She also pointed out that there was plenty of parking on Valley Road and on the side streets as well.

Parking issues may exist at other town parks and residents may now want to improve conditions at those locations, she said.

“We have to try to do the most good for the most people, but if we do this for this park would it open up the floodgates for other parks?” she said. Baskerville did concede more community activities are typically planned at Edgemont Park.

Deputy Mayor Robin Schlager who has lobbied for more green space and the aesthetics of the renovations

said everyone seems happy with the look of the circle.

Lippel said that 25 parking spots were originally desired, even though they would not be aesthetically pleasing.

Editor's note: A previous version of this story conveyed the council had decided to create the six spots. The council has instead directed the town manager, engineer and architect to review the plans and come up with costs. It will be voted on at a later date.



Montclair knitters warm the world

By ELIZABETH OGUSS

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You don't have to be a knitter to join the Montclair Knitting Circle. You can bring your embroidery, your needlepoint, or even your patchwork piecing, to the Edgemont Park House on Tuesday mornings and you'll be welcomed to the circle because it enlarges to accommodate as many people as join it.

On a rainy winter Tuesday, 15 women sat in comfy chairs working on a variety of projects — socks, leggings, blankets, sweaters, caps, cat mats — in yarns of many colors. Outdoors, raindrops created patterns on the pond; indoors, the patterns were created in wool.

The group began in May 2016 at the home of longtime Montclair resident Mary Krugman, who says she posted to the Montclair Watercooler Connections on Facebook, "Would anyone like to knit with me?"

Six knitters said yes, and that night at Krugman's house, they named themselves the Montclair Knitting Circle. They started a Facebook page that very night and by evening's end, 30 people had joined the group, says Barbara Rudy, a Knitting Circle regular.

Now, 100 knitters share their knitting accomplishments, and snags, to the page, along with project ideas and knitting-related cartoons and memes, says Rudy.

Interest is high enough that the Knitting Circle announced on Facebook earlier this week that to accommodate demand, there will be a session on Wednesdays from 1 to 3 p.m., at the Edgemont Park House, in addition to the Tuesday morning gathering.

Krugman says the group is "amazing. They are all ages, all colors, all nationalities, They're Asians, longtime Montclair residents, black and white, all over the spectrum."

Beginners are warmly welcomed and do not lack for experienced and willing teachers. Knitters work on their own projects, but pause to help one another with tricky things like sock toes.

When not helping one another, they talk about children, pets, "all that stuff people talk about when knitting," says Krugman, but not politics, as a rule. Though some members of the Montclair Knitting Circle knitted pink pussy hats for people taking part in the Jan. 21 Women's March, not everyone in the group subscribed to the march idea, said Rudy. But a shared love of yarn unifies the group.

Linda Tate, an administrative assistant in the municipal Health and Human Services Department, staffs the desk at Edgemont Park House, which hosts many activities of the township's programs for seniors. As she worked on a baby blanket for a grandchild-to-be, she and Veronica Hunter, a West Orange resident, practiced

the purl stitch with the help of another woman.

A knitter who didn't want to be identified so as to keep a secret was almost hidden under the big woolly blanket she's knitting for her son and his fiancée. Another shared photos of hats she'd knitted for her children.

The help these women extend one another reaches beyond the circle to many charitable efforts. A sale of their candy-corn caps raised \$500 for Toni's Kitchen at the Harvest Festival in Edgemont Park last October. They've donated cat mats to a Purrfect World, a nonprofit that helps animal shelters. And they're knitting caps that they place in boxes at Toni's Kitchen, the Human Needs Food Pantry, the Salvation Army, and at the Senior Services office in the Municipal Building. Anyone who needs a warm cap may take one.