



# CARING FOR THE ELDERLY

# He held her hand

JENNY YUEN

Even though Margaret Roper was a metre away from her dying mother and separated by a glass window, she didn't have to worry about her being alone as she left this world.

On Monday, 93-year-old Iris Roper, lying in her bed at Ballycliffe Lodge Long-Term Care Home in Ajax, was comforted by the hand of man who knelt beside her.

He had checked on her periodically when she had tested positive for COVID-19 two weeks earlier — on April 6 — and had volunteered to place a cellphone near her ear, so she could hear the voice of her family.

At 2:50 p.m., she died, listening to her Big Band music.

"He was holding my mom's hand," Margaret, 73, said on the phone from her Grimsby home Thursday. "He had the phone to her ear, so we could say our goodbyes. It was heartbreaking. I was able to speak to him and ask his name and he said it was Paul. I asked if he was a nurse or a personal support worker and he told me, 'No, I'm just the maintenance guy.' To me, he

## Maintenance worker 'a saint' in woman's dying moments

was a saint."

Margaret said that because many, if not all, long-term care homes are short-staffed, other staff members may pitch in to help.

"Through losing my mother, a bright star was visible in Paul," Margaret said.

The *Toronto Sun* reached out to Ballycliffe to get in touch with Paul, but didn't receive a call back.

As of Thursday, there were 85 cases of COVID-19 at Ballycliffe Lodge, of which 12 people had died, according to the Durham Region Health Department.

For the two weeks leading up to her death, Iris had trouble breathing and required intubation.

On Monday, Margaret said

she appeared incredibly lethargic.

Iris was born in the Winchester Hotel in Toronto on Aug. 13, 1926.

She was a mother to two boys and two girls, had nine grandkids and was married to her sweetheart, Clifford, until he died in 1988.

"We told her, 'It's OK to go, mum,'" said Margaret. "'Go to dad who is waiting for you in heaven.' It was heartbreaking."

Iris worked in the cold cafeteria at Markham High School for 15 years and later drove a school bus.

She was a hiking, camping and bowling aficionado, and a globetrotter, travelling across North America, Scotland, South Africa and Alaska.

Iris fractured her hip in June 2017 and also battled dementia.

"I'll miss her music. She loved to dance," said Margaret. "We had her up to my sister's cottage last summer. Even though she was in a wheelchair, she knew the music. The Big Band era was her favourite. She knew the words, even with dementia."

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Iris Roper died Monday at the Ballycliffe Lodge Long-Term Care Home in Ajax. A worker at the home held her hand while holding a phone to her ear so her family could say their goodbyes.



## Toronto doc a mask crusader

JANE STEVENSON

Toronto Dr. Elaine Chin, a 30-year medical veteran, says she has never worked harder in her life than in the battle against COVID-19.

Chin's search in mid-March for a single N95 mask for Stage 4 cancer patient Marilyne Nuhra, who had a compromised immune system, eventually led to her setting up the fundraising campaign, Masking Together, with the University of Toronto's Faculty of Medicine.



"I couldn't find a box of masks to get her," said Chin.

CHIN Needed masks

The collaborative effort has now raised millions of dollars to secure masks, set up temporary housing for medical trainees who are frontline workers unable to go home due to possible exposure and required to isolate, and assisted with COVID-19 research.

"It's emotionally rewarding as equally as it is exhausting," said Chin, who has served as medical director of Toronto's Executive Health Centre for the last decade.

For more information, check out [maskingtogetherchallenge.ca](http://maskingtogetherchallenge.ca).

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# Biz student answers the call

LIZ BRAUN

Mahad Shahzad was surprised to discover that seniors in care homes are often lonely or even abandoned.

And he was shocked to learn the high suicide rates among seniors.

Shahzad decided to do something about it: Chatting To Wellness is a program that puts student volunteers together with seniors for company and conversation.

The free program, which is community and mental health oriented, caught on quickly in long-term care homes in seven different cities.

Founding Chatting To

Wellness helped get Shahzad, now a Schulich business student, named one of Brampton's Top 40 Under 40 — when he was just 19.

When COVID-19 shut everything down, Shahzad and his volunteers switched their Chatting To Wellness service to the phone.

"The original purpose was just to go and talk, to lend an ear or a shoulder," Shahzad said in a recent interview.

"When you are stressed or worried about something, and you talk to family or friends about it, even if they can't

solve the problem for you, you still feel better afterward," he said. "That was the idea we started with."

Shahzad's volunteer group of 30 managed more than 3,000 visits with seniors before the pandemic moved the service to phone only.



SHAHZAD Aids seniors

But the phone format means visits can expand.

Chatting To Wellness is now Monday-Friday, 6-9 p.m. and open to any lonely or isolated

senior across Canada. Volunteers are nearly all health science students, who welcome the opportunity to

get practical experience in their field.

"We give them a unique opportunity to grow professionally and personally," said Shahzad. "I like to think we're helping build the next generation of health-care professionals. There's a huge need for gerontologists."

The volunteers are often surprised by what they learn. "They often hear, 'My kids haven't visited me for months.' One woman I visited hadn't had visitors in 25 years! The nurses told me, 'We haven't seen her this happy before! She has no family or friends.' I was 19 years old at the time and stunned to think this woman had had no visits the entire time I've been

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