

WOMAN'S LIFE IS 'CHANGED FOREVER'

Stafford virus survivor faces 'hard road ahead'

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Terri Schantz survived COVID-19, but she and her family will deal with its devastation for the rest of her life.

The Stafford County woman was one of the first three people in the Fredericksburg area to contract the disease, and it almost killed her. Before she got sick in mid-March, the 60-year-old had been active and independent, enjoying outdoor activities with her six grandchildren and the "perfect job" as a clinic assistant at North Stafford

High School.

Then the virus took hold, and for a while, it looked like "Mimi" might not make it, said her daughter, Brandi Banks. "It was definitely one of the scariest situations we've ever been through."

What started as pneumonia worsened, along with her breathing, and Schantz was put on a ventilator. During the two weeks a machine

breathed for her, Schantz suffered a stroke that damaged her left side.

Medicine to keep her blood pressure from dropping caused a blood clot, which cut off circulation in her good hand. A week after she got off the ventilator, the thumb and all the fingers on her right hand were amputated.

SEE SCHANTZ, A8

► FROM A1

Months later, Schantz remains unable to walk. Sometimes, it's hard for her to get the words out, although those around her say she sounds good. She has physical and occupational therapy twice a week to strengthen her legs and improve the range of motion in her arm.

Still, she deals daily with pain in her left shoulder and phantom aches from fingers that have been removed. The worst part is "not being able to do anything on my own," said Schantz, who became a widow three years ago when her husband, Mark, died.

Her life has changed in every way possible, but she tries to keep it all in perspective.

"I'm lucky to be where I am, even though I still have a hard road ahead," she said.

Her daughter says there's been a lot reported about the opposite extremes of COVID-19, from those who show no symptoms to the daily death tolls. Little has been mentioned about patients like her mother, who will never be the same.

"This is what a survivor looks like," Banks said. "It's not like getting a cold or getting the flu and getting better. Their lives are changed forever."

'VIRUS IS VERY REAL'

The novel coronavirus is part of a family of viruses responsible for a wide range of problems, from the common cold to severe diseases. Early on, some public officials compared it to the seasonal flu, saying the two were similar in severity and suggesting COVID-19 would go away when the weather got warmer.

Instead, death tolls in the United States have risen with the summer temperatures to the point that more than 162,000 people have died, including 2,322 Virginians and 55 people in the local health district.

As for COVID-19's similarity to influenza, "the flu does not have lasting effects the way this does," according to Mary Washington Healthcare officials. But because it's still a new virus, health officials "are just beginning to grasp" the long-term consequences, said Dr. Christopher Newman, its medical director.

"Thankfully, most have a complete recovery, although many suffer from longer-term issues such as cardiac inflammation, chronic lung disease, shortness of breath, decreased exercise tolerance, fatigue, headaches, difficulty concentrating, blood clots and strokes," he said.

In local discussions about COVID-19, Dr. Donald Stern, former acting director of the Rappahannock Area Health District, often said that 98 percent of those who get COVID-19 will recover. At least half of those infected will not even know they have it, he said.

But how many will suffer as Schantz has is unclear.

"None of those numbers

matter when it is you or someone you love that is affected," said her daughter. "We want people to know that this virus is very real."

'ALONGROAD'

School was still in session in March when Schantz, a certified nursing assistant at North Stafford High School, started to get sick. It was almost time for spring break, and she thought she was coming down with a seasonal respiratory infection.

She has mild asthma, but had shingles a few weeks earlier and guesses her immune system "was shot." When her temperature climbed to 104 degrees, she knew it wasn't a normal infection.

Schantz went to an urgent care clinic, then was sent to the emergency room at Mary Washington Hospital. She'd spend almost six weeks there, with family members being updated over the phone about her declining condition because hospitals didn't allow visitors.

Schantz doesn't remember much about the hospitalization, other than "crazy dreams" that might have been snippets of reality. She had glimpses of nurses taking care of her, getting medicine for the pain and not being able to eat or drink.

"I found out bits and pieces as we went day to day," she said. "I didn't know how serious it was until later on."

Schantz stayed in a rehabilitation facility for almost four more weeks before she came home on May 20. Banks, her husband and their four children live down the road, so they moved in with Schantz to take care of her. The Banks family is having a room added to their home so Schantz can move in with them permanently.

Schantz said she can feed herself if someone sets everything in front of her, but she needs help with everything else. Doctors have talked about her eventually getting a prosthesis on her right hand, which seems to be healing "pretty good," she said.

The problem is the left side. She's gotten some movement back in the leg and can stand briefly, shifting weight from one leg to another. But she can't take any steps, and she doesn't have any movement in her left hand.

"She's doing a lot better than she was," her daughter said. "It's definitely a long road, but her spirits are up and she's moving in the right direction, for sure."

'NOT GIVING UP'

Schantz has applied for Medicaid, but hasn't been approved. She's still on the school's health insurance, but she has co-pays for more than nine weeks in facilities as well as for therapy.

Her family includes her son David, his wife Emily and their two kids. They were in the news in May for finding paper bags in the road while driving in Goochland County. The bags were stuffed with almost \$1 million dollars in cash, and they handed it all over to the authorities.

Schantz and her children have talked often about the difficulty in getting Medicaid approval and how reliant she is on her family members, who care for her 24/7.

"What do people do when they don't have the help they need?" her daughter wondered.

Becky Ponton, a fellow church member at Round Oak Baptist Church in Caroline County, has known the Schantz family about 12 years. She started a GoFundMe account to help with expenses, and it has raised almost \$6,000. Checks also can be made out to Brandi Banks and mailed to 200 Truslow Road, Fredericksburg, VA 22405.

"Terri loves her family and especially children," Ponton said. "She has always been very active in her grandkids' lives, keeping them so her son and daughter could have outings and breaks for themselves. She co-teaches the nursery at Round Oak and has for many years. She gave up her time of Bible study, so parents could have theirs."

Others described the same type of compassion. During her five years at North Stafford, she's helped with after-school events and ticket sales for various sports. She worked with the Fairy Godmother Project to help families diagnosed with cancer.

"She has had a close, positive relationship with many of the students, offering support and being a positive adult role model," said Colette Hokana, administrator of health services for Stafford schools.

Schantz didn't feel up to having a newspaper photographer visit her home, so her family submitted photos of her—at school events, fishing at Lake Mooney in Stafford and enjoying her grandchildren. Images show the group gathered at a park for her birthday last year, at Paramount's Kings Dominion last summer and picking out a Christmas tree in 2018.

It's hard to believe "this virus could cause her to lose so much mobility and independence," Ponton said. "But she has a great personality, a positive attitude and a loving family. She's not giving up and we won't give up on her, either."

Cathy Dyson: 540/374-5425
cdyson@freelancestar.com

Father-daughter bond is forged by fire

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

When Vinny Tafoya thinks about the fire that swept through his Oregon town and the moments he had to evacuate, with only the clothes he wore and his Great Dane at his side, he gets a little choked up. Not because of his possessions that went up in smoke. He says those can be replaced.

The loss of life is another matter, but it's all so overwhelming that he'll have to process that later. He said the times call for action, so he's focused on traveling from one charred town to another.

He and other volunteers are rescuing animals that have been displaced from the worst fires on the West Coast in almost two decades.

What does bring the 42-year-old remodeling contractor to tears is the way his daughter, Jaccinda Tafoya of Spotsylvania County, has worked so hard to help him since he lost everything. Her concern is particularly overwhelming because he said he hasn't shown her the same.

"I have done nothing to elicit such love. I wasn't a decent dad to her. Mostly wasn't even around," he wrote in a text message. "She has every right to harbor ill will towards me, yet all she shows is love and compassion. I don't deserve this. She is an absolutely amazing young woman, and I couldn't be more proud of her efforts."

The father-daughter relationship adds another element to a story that's plenty dramatic on its own. More than 5 million acres in Oregon, Washington and California have been scorched by wildfires in recent weeks, leaving tens of thousands of residents displaced and at least 27 people dead. News footage shows entire towns reduced to ashes after being consumed by raging infernos.

"I'm terrified and just devastated," Jaccinda Tafoya said about her father and others who lost everything.

► FROM A1

'HELL ON EARTH'

When Jaccinda Tafoya looks at pictures of the burned remains of her father's trailer, she doesn't think about the man who drifted from place to place much of his adult life, including a few years spent in Spotsylvania. Or that she hadn't seen him for 15 years, although they talked occasionally on the phone.

Instead, she remembers last month, when she and her 7-year-old daughter, Everlyse, visited him in Oregon. Jaccinda's grandfather died earlier this year, and she couldn't bear the thought that Everlyse hadn't even met her own grandfather.

The family arranged a trip west, and Jaccinda Tafoya was thrilled to see that her dad had finally had found a place to call home and was trying to be "a normal adult."

"His front yard was just incredible, trees with fruit, gardens there, tons of chickens," she said. "We would walk out and have breakfast under these beautiful green trees. Everybody in the area knows everybody, and they're just so friendly.

"To see the destruction where I was just at—we were just camping there—and now it's a complete opposite picture. It's kind of hard to process. It's literally become hell on earth in only a few weeks."

The 26-year-old had to do something.

She started a Go Fund Me account to raise money for a new trailer—or even a camper—because she couldn't bear the thought of her father being homeless. He had paid cash for the one he lost in the fire, and because he doesn't trust banks or other institutions, she said he didn't have any insurance.

Knowing "he's too stub-

born to ask for help," she said she didn't even tell him about the account. But then a friend of his got wind of it and told Vinny Tafoya, who was blown away by the gesture.

One of Jaccinda Tafoya's co-workers at Pride Auto Sales in Four Mile Fork, where she's a finance manager, said it's just like her to want to help those around her.

"She's a very caring person overall. She wants to be the one who fixes things," said Chris Evans. "She wants to play a vital role in helping anyone around her, with relationship issues or money issues. She's always been somebody who cares about other peoples' situations."

'WE WILL REBUILD'

Given what Vinny Tafoya has been doing since

HOW TO HELP

Jaccinda Tafoya has raised about \$6,000 through a Go Fund Me account to help her father, Vinny, purchase a trailer after his was destroyed in one of the Oregon fires. More information is available online at gofundme.com. Search for "Jaccinda Tafoya."

the Holiday Farm Fire swept through an area of Oregon about three hours east of Eugene, he and his daughter may have a lot in common.

About 800 people lived in Blue River, a town reduced to rubble on Sept. 8 when wildfires tore west along the McKenzie River, according to The Oregonian newspaper. Vinny Tafoya told his daughter he had a few minutes to evacuate—and all he grabbed was his black Great Dane, Diesel.

The two stayed away for a few days, then returned to their community to search for livestock and pets displaced by the fires. He and other volunteers have followed the trail of scorched earth.

He said that hundreds of animals have been taken to the fairgrounds in Eugene for potential reunions with owners. He's helped rescue horses and pigs, goats and sheep,

snakes and fish, chickens and turkeys, pets and wild animals.

"Yesterday, a pigeon flew to me in need of water," Vinny Tafoya wrote in a text. "That was so cool. If the livestock is big and safe enough, then we are feeding and watering them. There are also locals upriver that are helping. This is a large situation and we are doing all that we can."

When his daughter hears accounts like that, she wants to do even more to help her father.

"He's definitely a good guy," she said. "I don't know too many people who would just stop what they're doing so they can go sleep in a car and help people track down their lost livestock."

One photo he shared with his daughter shows him and other volunteers carrying a wild sheep that had been scaling 5-foot fences in panic. The men tackled it from the back end so they could move it to safety.

Another showed rescuers toting water to horses in a fenced paddock, smoke from the fires looming in the background.

When Vinny Tafoya sees the way people have helped each other, as well as creatures great and small, he's moved by the compassion and finds a new strength forged from the fire. It helps when he faces a grisly scene like he did last week, when the body of a neighbor was recovered.

"We've come across too much death. It's heart-wrenching," he said. "This fire is tragic, but it's also bringing us closer than ever before and cleaning the forest of all the overgrowth.

"We can see through to the river now. The forest will be amazing in a couple years. We will rebuild."

Cathy Dyson: 540/374-5425
cdyson@freelancestar.com

STAFFORD FAMILY COMMITTED TO CARING

Two elderly moms, one devoted couple

BY CATHY DYSON
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Before Bob Lester and Kathy Sampeck married 32 years ago, they pledged a devotion that would go far beyond their love for each other.

“We made a pact that we would always take care of our moms,” she said.

They’ve lived up to that agreement, even as their mothers have passed the cen-

tury mark. “The moms,” as they’re called, are Fran Sampeck, 103, and Ann Lester, 101, and they live with their children in a senior community in Stafford County.

Given that the four residents have 346 years of living among them, they certainly qualify for the over-55 club.

While taking care of an elderly parent—or even two at a time—is not that unusual,

“caring for two over 100 is quite uncommon,” said Valerie Hopson-Bell, a local geriatric care adviser.

The relative good health of the two moms and their fairly active lifestyles, which include regular trips to the library and church, hair stylist or favorite buffet, make them even more remarkable, she said.

“That’s what we like to

see,” Hopson-Bell said, “people still functioning in their advanced ages.”

Their cardiologist, Dr. Oluwaseyi Bolorunduro of Stafford, often tells others about the two moms, living under one roof with their children, and how well it all works.

“They’re an inspirational story,” he said. “They have a truly unique situation, and

SEE TWO MOMS, A8

TWO MOMS

► FROM A1

they are able to manage it very well.”

‘STUNNING BEAUTIES’

It seems disrespectful to refer to someone over 100 by a first name, so we’ll call the moms Miss Ann and Miss Fran.

Miss Ann came to live with the couple first, in 2013, when Bob and Kathy moved into the house in Leeland Station. Miss Fran followed about two years later.

Bob and Kathy replaced bathtubs with walk-in showers, added rails on both sides of the stairs and put in grab bars beside the toilets. They pulled up the carpet in the living room and put in wooden floors for walker wheels to glide over.

Miss Ann had been living alone since her husband died in 1974; at that time, she lived in Northern Virginia and still worked for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

From the moment she set foot in Stafford, she insisted on paying rent for her living quarters in the finished basement. She cooked for herself for the longest time, until the smell of burning baked goods wafted upstairs.

Her eyesight has failed, and her arthritic knees give her trouble, but Miss Ann remains independent, to the point of being feisty.

“One of the biggest battles we have with her is that she wants to do everything herself,” her son said.

Miss Ann uses a walker downstairs, but won’t be seen with one outside the house.

“She’d be very upset,” her son said, if she were to miss Saturday evening mass at St. Mary’s Catholic Church in Fredericksburg. She insists the certified nursing aide, Dafneyana Sanchez, is there for Miss Fran, not for her.

Her sass shone through on a recent chilly morning when the two moms got ready for their weekly hair appointment.

Before leaving, Sanchez asked Miss Ann if she needed to use the bathroom.

“Been there, done that,” she responded.

When the two walked toward the car and a newspaper photographer chronicled the moment, Miss Ann quipped:

“How can you keep track of all these stunning beauties?”

‘SHE’S MY HERO’

If feistiness has kept Miss Ann going, then laid-back sweetness might be the reason Miss Fran has been around since World War I.

A native of Connecticut, she lived in the same home almost 70 years, long after she became a widow. Kathy convinced her to move to Stafford after Miss Fran’s two other daughters died within three days of each other.

Miss Fran has a bedroom on the main floor, and she likes the arrangement.

“I’m a lady of leisure,” she said, smiling.

Kathy tucks in her mother every night and says Miss Fran regularly “goes to bed laughing.” Kathy listens, via a monitor, as her mother prays for every family member, by name.

Miss Fran believes everyone is entitled to their own opinions and should be able to live their own lives. She’s a voracious reader, going through four or five books a week, and historical fiction, particularly about the royals, is her favorite.

“I like royalty,” she said. “I

think I must have some royal blood.”

Kathy was nervous when the newspaper people hovered during one of the family’s recent nightly dinners, but Miss Fran barely batted an eye.

A few days later, when Miss Fran was getting ready to go out and Sanchez mentioned she had spilled something on her shirt, the centenarian shrugged and said: “Oh, well, that’s how it is with old people.”

Her easygoing spirit contributes to her positive outlook, her daughter said.

“She doesn’t get rattled about anything,” Kathy said. “She’s my hero.”

INFORMED ADVOCATES

Bob is 74, Kathy is 68, and both still work full-time. They have a business in which they serve as vocational consultants for Social Security hearings, and he regularly works in Richmond while she takes calls and does research from home.

Their caregiver is with the moms during the week, eight hours a day.

The couple’s background has made them better advocates. She’s well-versed on treatment plans and insurance benefits, and he was a Navy corpsman during the Vietnam War era. He still has a white pharmacy coat from those days, and sometimes wears it when he gives the moms their medicine.

“I like this doctor,” Miss Fran said one night. “He kisses me.”

She had repeated fractures in her spinal vertebra until they were all reinforced, and spent a lot of time recovering from surgery in a rehab facility.

At one such place a few years ago, Kathy was told her mother would no longer be able to walk, dress herself

or use the bathroom. She wouldn’t accept that outcome for her mom—who took an art class at 85 and drove until she was 96—so Kathy made sure she got needed therapy.

These days, Miss Fran, who’s hard of hearing, moves so quickly behind the handles of her walker that her caregiver regularly tells her to slow down.

“She says, ‘I will, I will,’ and then she’s gone,” Sanchez said while going up the ramp to see the hair stylist. She tilted her head toward Miss Ann and said, “This one says she doesn’t have to rush; she’s retired.”

Miss Ann chimed in: “I stopped rushing 30 years ago.”

‘VERY STRUCTURED’

During her 20 years in home health care, Sanchez said she’s never seen a couple as attentive toward their parents as Bob and Kathy.

“Everything is on point,” she said. “The way they work as a team is wonderful.”

The arrangement has its downsides, though. Bob has two children from a previous marriage and one daughter with Kathy, and it’s not easy for them to visit family or take

a vacation.

When their daughter, who lives in Montana, recently had a baby, the couple visited separately so one of them would be home with the moms.

They take turns cooking, or cook together, each night, and Kathy says she never imagined she’d be making dinner for four people at her age. She likes being spontaneous, but there’s not much room for that in their daily regimen: work, dinner and dessert—Miss Ann never misses it—followed by “Wheel of Fortune” and “Jeopardy.”

Miss Fran loves watching baseball and hockey while Miss Ann enjoys episodes of “Gunsmoke” on her basement TV.

“Our lives are very structured,” Kathy said.

Still, the couple say they’re blessed to have this time with two “very strong women” who did so much for them that they vowed to return the favor.

“You can’t even put a price on this gift that we have to be able to have time with our two moms,” Kathy said. “We are incredibly lucky.”

Cathy Dyson: 540/374-5425
cdyson@freelancestar.com