

STAFFORD FAMILY COMMITTED TO CARING

# Two elderly moms, one devoted couple

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THE FREE LANCE-STAR

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

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# TWO MOMS

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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.”

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