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CENTRAL EDITION



IMPACTING YOUR COMMUNITY

Tamara Shephard/Metroland

Anne Pietropaolo, seniors' program co-ordinator with Humber Valley United Church, centre, has launched more than 30 virtual programs on Zoom for seniors 55-plus during the pandemic, assisted by church volunteers, Ruth Johnson, left, and Sally Jo Martin, right, who are also avid program participants.

# VIRTUAL PROGRAMS 'A GODSEND' FOR SENIORS

TAMARA SHEPHARD  
tshephard@toronto.com

Seated dancing led by a National Ballet of Canada instructor. Instructor-led painting with a kit. Live music. Creative and memoir writing. Cooking. Crafts.

Humber Valley United Church's robust roster of free virtual Zoom programs offered weekdays helps seniors 55+ stay active and engaged during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ruth Johnson participates in one or two virtual programs daily.

Johnson's husband died a year ago, right before the pandemic began.

"Being with people (while grieving) is important. And then you're not," said Johnson, a congregant and church volunteer. "This has been a Godsend for me.

This 55+ program and Zoom have become my new best friends."

Next month, Humber Valley United hosts a showcase of its 33 virtual programs on a Zoom call on March 29 from noon to 1 p.m.

See PROGRAMS, page 10

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# PROGRAMS INCLUDE MUSIC, COOKING, WRITING, CRAFTS

Continued from page 1

Visit [bit.ly/2P7BrV9](http://bit.ly/2P7BrV9) to register.

It's a community outreach program.

"You feel connected with people in church," Johnson added. "You see people online and have discussions. It's really very valuable."

One of Johnson's friends participates. A widow who lives in a cottage up north with vision issues who can't drive, the programs help break her isolation during the pandemic.

Similarly, another of Johnson's friends has a husband with dementia. "She found it extremely helpful and the discussion afterward very good," Johnson said of a dementia resource sharing virtual program.

"We want to be the heart of the community," said Anne Pietropaolo, the Islington and Eglinton avenues area church's seniors' program co-ordinator, who heads the seniors 55+ virtual programs.

"Connected. Creative. Caring" is the motto of the circa 1953 church of approximately 200 families.

This week, there's a session on medical cannabis. Past programs have included dementia resources, fraud prevention, will and powers of attorney.

The program is funded by a New Horizons for Seniors Program federal government grant. Sessions are run through Zoom, a video communications app, on a computer or iPad.

The church's calendar of activities including its virtual programs is available on its website at [www.hvuc.ca](http://www.hvuc.ca).

Virtual program registration is required on the church's website or by emailing Pietropaolo at [anne@hvuc.ca](mailto:anne@hvuc.ca).

Sally Jo Martin, a congregant and church volunteer, sends a few neighbourhood friends the weekly list of upcoming programs.

"We're trying to take care of the whole person," Martin said.

"It has been educational, as well as social and fun."

Deborah Turnbull, chair of the church's board of directors, added: "People are supportive of each other. Some groups have become like support groups for one another."

Seniors 55+ from the U.S. and the U.K. and as far as Cambodia participate.

In fact, many program participants are now hosting their own virtual program.

"People are sharing ideas about things they like to do and starting their own group," Pietropaolo said. "Now that people are becoming more comfortable using Zoom as a tool, it has become a way for people to share their skills and talents."

Programs evolve. "People are constantly crafting and building the vision as we go," Pietropaolo said.

Now, Pietropaolo and her team, including program assistant Beverley Conner, offer seniors 55+ Zoom training.

Humber Valley United has a long, rich tradition of programming ranging from tai chi, yoga and liturgical dance to current affairs, bridge, a men's lunch group and United Church Women's groups.

Humber Valley United's new minister, Rev. Dr. Trevor Brisbin, lauded the virtual programs as an example of the congregation's commitment to community.

"What drew me to Humber Valley is its capacity to see beyond these beautiful walls to see the community and what matters," he said. "During COVID, isolation for seniors is sometimes at dangerous levels, and it's scary for some people. With these virtual programs, there's something for everyone. There's no need to go through COVID alone, much less to be aging through COVID alone."

**STORY BEHIND THE STORY:** When reporter Tamara Shephard learned Humber Valley United



Tamara Shephard/Metroland  
Rev. Dr. Trevor Brisbin says "there's no need to go through COVID alone."

*Church will be showcasing its virtual programs for seniors 55+, she wanted to learn more about the programs' evolution and impact.*

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