

‘Free again!’ Bay Area seniors celebrate COVID vaccine second shot with margaritas and belly dancers

Newfound freedom a perfect antidote for debilitating loneliness and isolation



Residents enjoy the belly dance performance by Heaven Mousalem, left, during a Purim celebration at Moldaw Residences in Palo Alto, Calif., on Friday, Feb. 26, 2021. (Randy Vazquez/ Bay Area News Group)

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PALO ALTO — After nearly a year of lockdown, the residents of Moldaw retirement community put their masks aside this past week, crowded outdoor tables and celebrated their newfound liberation.

“Free again! Free again! Free again!” said Judy Kligler, 88, toasting the friends she’d barely seen since last March.

“She’s going to burst into song if you don’t watch it,” chimed in Rina Humphers, 85.



Joanne Shapiro, left, places a flower near the waist of belly dancer Heaven Mousalem, right, during a Purim celebration at Moldaw Residences in Palo Alto, Calif., on Friday, Feb. 26, 2021. (Randy Vazquez/ Bay Area News Group)

These are the lucky second-dosers, the elderly near the top of the COVID-19 vaccination list who've completed both rounds of shots. Although it may be weeks or months before all their pandemic restrictions are lifted, they're ready to party.

Mariachis performed Monday. Belly dancers on Friday.

"I'm speechless," said 94-year-old Sam Silverman as the belly dancer passed his table. "She said she's a married woman. That put cold water on the whole deal."

Although deaths across the country topped 500,000, and California exceeded 50,000 in the last week, the elderly who were most vulnerable to the ravages of the virus are realizing that with vaccination, their fears are largely behind them. So is the isolation. They have survived the pandemic. And once again, at retirement homes and senior communities across the Bay Area, they are beginning to embrace the simple joys of living.

Starting Monday — a full two weeks after their second dose of the Pfizer vaccine — they will add bunco, bridge and mahjong and outdoor dining for lunch and dinner to the growing social calendar at Moldaw.

“I’ve already started a dance card. I’m calling it my hug card,” said Jackie Hamburg, 75, who broke into tears while playing a crossword puzzle after her second dose, grateful for being spared by the virus. “I already have three people scheduled for hugs on March 1.”

The vaccinations couldn’t come soon enough for the 210 residents at Moldaw, an upscale retirement community in Palo Alto that is home to mostly Jewish seniors who celebrate Shabbat and other holidays together. In a community that was used to daily excursions to museums and movies and Trader Joe’s, many have been isolated in their rooms for most of the pandemic, a debilitating situation that has led to soul-crushing loneliness among elderly everywhere.



Carlee Weiss, 83, left, receives their second dose of the COVID-19 vaccine at Moldaw Residences in Palo Alto, Calif., on Thursday, Feb. 18, 2021. (Randy Vazquez/ Bay Area News Group)

As it did for many tragic cases at long-term care facilities, the vaccine came too late for 96-year-old Herb Leifer. Last month the retired physicist became the first and only Moldaw resident to die of COVID and one of only five residents to contract it.

Over the course of the pandemic, eight staff members tested positive but were quickly quarantined. Still, overall the seniors living at Moldaw Residences have been far luckier than most. Across the country, coronavirus deaths at long-term care facilities, which include assisted living and nursing homes, accounted for an astounding 35 percent of all COVID deaths, according to The Atlantic’s COVID Tracking Project and

largely confirmed by the Kaiser Family Foundation. Although assisted living facilities in particular are not subject to federal reporting requirements and accurate data is difficult to assess, the coronavirus was blamed for more than 170,000 deaths by Feb. 18 in long-term care-type facilities.

In a race for the vaccine, Moldaw Executive Director Elyse Gerson started calling her connections at Walgreens beginning Dec. 20 to set up the first vaccine clinic in Moldaw's auditorium. It didn't come for more than a month.

Just nine days before the first vaccine was administered here on Jan. 27, Leifer, who edited the community newsletter and was otherwise healthy, tested positive for the virus. He died Feb. 6.

"It was so close to getting the vaccine, it's cruel," said his widow, Elizabeth Leifer, 93, who met her husband in 1946 when she was a teenager and he was delivering kosher meats to her home. "We were married 72 years. It's really not enough."



Elizabeth Leifer, 93, looks at a portrait of her husband Herb at Moldaw Residences in Palo Alto, Calif., on Thursday, Feb. 18, 2021. Leifer's husband died of COVID-19 on Feb. 5. (Randy Vazquez/ Bay Area News Group)

Like seniors across the country, the couple — and the whole Moldaw community — had been so careful and had given up so much over the past year.

While many residents enjoyed daily walks around the campus — and small groups would occasionally meet for socially-distanced outdoor cocktails — those in wheelchairs and walkers or with debilitating ailments found few social outlets. Meetings in the mailroom became spontaneous moments of joy as did shout outs from one balcony to the next.

But the dining room remains closed and the elevator has been limited to one passenger. Adding to the oppression, the preschool next door, where children's laughter wafted through the courtyards, was shut down for months.

“Just getting people out of bed every day has been the focus for us,” Gerson said.

Geriatric experts are convinced that loneliness is deadly, too.

“I think some people are dying directly from loneliness and isolation,” said Dr. Carla Perissinotto, associate professor of geriatrics at UC San Francisco who authored a 2012 study on the topic and has ongoing studies during the pandemic. “I cannot actually write as a cause of death loneliness. It's not considered physiologically possible. But what we know about how loneliness and isolation can affect health — worsen dementia, cardiovascular health and our functional abilities — we can become more frail. All cause more mortality, actually.”

To help those suffering most, social worker Karen Lerner was hired at Moldaw last fall.

“What do you say to a 98-year-old man who says, ‘This could be my last year of living, this could be the last month I'm alive, and I don't want to end it like this? This is why I moved here, to not be alone,’” Lerner said. “That's a real concern when you're 98 — to live the last year of your life without your friends and family next to you. Our goal is to make sure nobody feels that way anymore.”



Evelyn Katchman, 88, left, Diane Claerbout, 78, center, and Jackie Hamburg, 75, right, sit outside at Moldaw Residences in Palo Alto, Calif., on Thursday, Feb. 18, 2021. (Randy Vazquez/ Bay Area News Group)

Staff members have done their best to add engaging programming — guided meditations, “excursions” to New York and New Orleans, cooking demonstrations, “laughing yoga.” Last spring, they delivered tomato seedlings to grow on balconies. Last summer, they served ice cream cones outside. But most programs have been virtual, with residents navigating their computer screens to tune in. That hasn’t been easy for those with hearing and vision problems and bafflement with technology.

Even the healthiest are experiencing loneliness.

As Al Dorogusker, 85, put it: “the walls in my apartment have receded about eight feet.”

“I eat with Lester Holt and Chris Cuomo,” Evelyn Katchman, 88, said of night dates with the television newscasters.

“I eat with Perry Mason,” said Hamburg, who drafted her “hug card.” “They’re our best friends now.”



Betty Adler, 79, left, and husband Jack Adler, 85, right, share a laugh and some drinks with friends for the first time since the pandemic began at Moldaw Residences in Palo Alto, Calif., on Monday, Feb. 22, 2021. (Randy Vazquez/ Bay Area News Group)

In the East Bay, during the hard lockdown last spring at Merrill Gardens retirement community in Lafayette, “we had people who were just losing their minds in their rooms,” said community relations director Denise DiBetta. “Even people who were considered high functioning were spiraling with depression.”

Staff members propped up folding chairs outside apartment doors for Friday happy hours, where residents chose snacks and libations from a roving bar cart and played bingo in the hallways.

Starting last fall, they finally opened the dining room, but unless you were part of a couple, only one person was allowed at each table.

“They can have a conversation,” DiBetta said, “but you can imagine with senior ears, there’s a lot of yelling going on.”

Assisted living facilities like Moldaw and Merrill Gardens are following guidance from their counties about what sanctions can be lifted — but for people who have already been double-dosed with the vaccine, there is little direction from public health officials so far.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has yet to release guidelines for gathering among vaccinated people, but on Thursday Dr. Anthony Fauci [said in an interview on CNN](#) that vaccinated people can gather individually with minimal risk.



A mariachi band plays during a margarita party at Moldaw Residences in Palo Alto, Calif., on Monday, Feb. 22, 2021. (Randy Vazquez/ Bay Area News Group)

With confidence that double doses of the vaccine are working, retirement communities are starting to ease up on the rules — with precautions. As mariachis played last week and Moldaw’s director surveyed the colorful courtyard filled with laughing seniors, she couldn’t help but smile herself.

“They’re all so happy,” Gerson said.

Residents were still adjusting to the realization that five or six people were sitting at each table — together. Masks were casually draped on wrists and set down next to paper napkins.

“We’re not even six feet part. This is very daring,” said Betty Adler, 79. “This is something new for me being on the other side of the vaccination.

“The world hasn’t changed completely, but it’s getting there.”
