

Lifelong Waterloo Region resident has seen it all in her 108 years

By **Johanna Weidner** Record Reporter

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KITCHENER — The COVID-19 pandemic is a bit of a “been there, done that” worldwide crisis for Marie Hickey.

Celebrating her 108th birthday on Monday, Hickey lived through the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic — not to mention two world wars and the Great Depression.

She’s excited to mark the noteworthy birthday on Monday and living through the major events of the past century, but she doesn’t have kind words for the recent virus gripping the globe.

“I don’t like it,” said Hickey, reluctant to chat when her after-lunch rest was disturbed.

Her biggest complaint about COVID-19 and all the tight restrictions that have come with it? A hairdresser can’t come into her home at Doon Village Retirement Residence in Kitchener for her regular cut, perm and styling.

Hickey was born and raised in Elmira and lived in Cambridge for more than 50 years before moving into Doon Village in 2017.

She left school at 14 to start working at the Kaufman Rubber Company in Kitchener to help support her family. After marrying, she worked as a clerk in a downtown Galt department store followed by a job as a switchboard operator at metal factory.

“She’s definitely someone who is warm and welcoming,” said Christina Murphy, sales adviser at Doon Village.

Hickey takes daily walks in the home’s hallways to stay healthy, stopping to chat but mostly enjoying reading in solitude.

“On the whole, she’s kind of quiet,” Murphy said. “Mostly she’s a bookworm.”

The answer is simple when Hickey is asked how she made it to the milestone 108: “She said it’s in the genes,” Murphy said.

Hickey’s birthday will be marked with balloons and a big cake to share with the home’s residents, and a drive-by visit from family.

Her grandson John Schmiedendorf hopes that soon the family can get together to celebrate the birthday girl properly. They speak on the phone almost every day, but in-person visits are not allowed during the pandemic except when providing essential care.

He’s only seen her once in the past year to accompany her to a dentist appointment. While the nursing home is good at keeping the family connected in ways that are allowed, “going to the window and waving has kind of lost its charm.”

Before the home went into a lockdown to protect its residents from COVID-19, Hickey was quite sharp.

“It sounds like she’s 100,” Schmiedendorf said jokingly. “Her age is catching up with her.”

Longevity is definitely in the family’s genes — Hickey’s surviving brother of three turns 106 this year.

Schmiedendorf said his grandmother knew a lot of people and her family jokes she’s on her third set of friends. When her close friends passed away, she became friends with companions of her daughter — Schmiedendorf’s mother — and played regular card games together. They too started to pass along, and now Hickey is making friends with fellow Doon Village residents.

She lived independently in her own home — a wartime house she moved into with her husband Jack who she met on a blind date on New Year’s Eve — until she broke her wrist in a fall. Her husband died back in the 1970s and she didn’t remarry.

“Her house was a museum when she finally moved out,” Schmiedendorf said.

Always it was the same dining room set and recovered couch — her frugality a leftover from living through the depression.

“Everything she had she either fixed or kept well maintained,” her grandson said.

Quarantining is nothing new to Hickey. A family member had the Spanish flu and self-isolated from the rest of the household until he recovered.

“They really didn’t get touched by it at all that time,” Schmiedendorf said. And thankfully, he added, that’s the case for the family during this pandemic, too.

He marvels at all his grandmother witnessed in her 108 years.

“She’s lived through a lot.”



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