

Top, Pastor Diana Gibson speaks during a celebration of life ceremony held at First Presbyterian Church in Palo Alto on July 17 to honor Sarah Johnson, who died of COVID-19 complications on April 18, 2020. Center, Anna plays “Happy Birthday” on the piano for senior Annie, middle, at the Avenidas Rose Kleiner Center in Mountain View on July 23. Above, a group of friends have a drink together at the Pioneer Saloon in Woodside on July 22.

# Signs of life

*Midpeninsula residents cautiously gather again but still feel the effects of the pandemic*

Photographs by Magali Gauthier | Story by Lloyd Lee

As First Presbyterian Church of Palo Alto prepared for a memorial service on July 17, its first indoor gathering since the campus closed 16 months ago, organizers recognized that after more than a year of avoiding large crowds, some people might not know exactly how to greet each other.

So to make things simpler, color-coded stickers and bracelets were handed out to the 85 masked attendees: green for hugs and high fives, yellow for elbow bumps and red for greet from 6 feet — an efficient way to avoid the awkward millisecond in which one person goes in for the handshake while the other goes for the elbow.

The celebration of life ceremony was dedicated to the late Sarah Johnson, a former Palo Alto resident and longtime member of the church who was described as a “gracious Southern lady” with a strong passion for political activism. She died of COVID-19

complications on April 18, 2020. Her family, who flew in from different states, had postponed services until things felt safe.

That Saturday afternoon, Pastor Diana Gibson went up to the lectern in her signature blue clergy shirt and began: “Let us gather in remembrance.”

Though many are reluctant to say the pandemic is over, fear of the coronavirus among the public has simmered down thanks to recent advancements, mainly effective vaccines, which have allowed California to drop most health restrictions and revive once lost and now cherished practices.

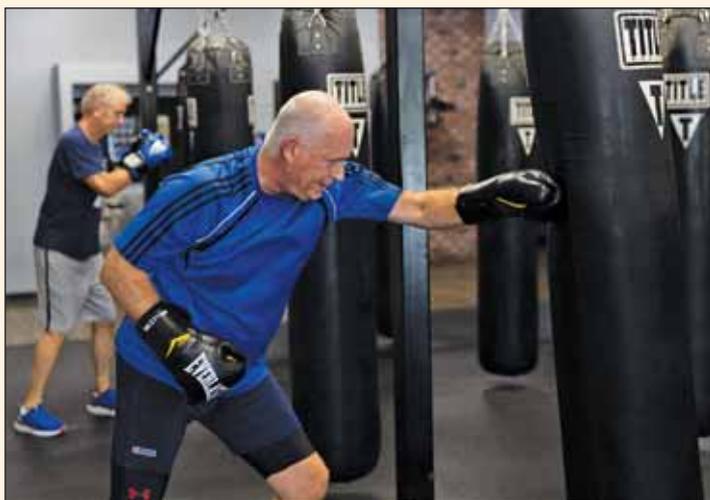
Since the state “reopened” on June 15, gatherings have restarted throughout the Midpeninsula. Relatives from multiple generations are coming together to celebrate 100th birthdays; concerts and other entertainment productions are happening; and people are now flying in from other states and countries to see family and friends as their comfort level

increases.

Leah Hwang, founder of Two Perfect Events in Palo Alto, which organizes large and small celebratory gatherings, is on the front lines of the resurgence: Her calendars for this year and the next are now packed with parties — some of which include postponed weddings from the previous year. Her company is booked with around 30 events for the summer and fall, which is typical for a normal year, she said.

At Mitchell Park on July 23, about 160 masked and unmasked parents and children gathered at the Magical Bridge Playground for its second community concert of the summer. Alice Tang, who was visiting from New York, joined her friend and her friend’s three kids — comfortable in a low lawn chair and enjoying the outside air without a mask.

“When I’m outdoors I feel very comfortable,” Tang said. “Indoors is when I’m a little bit more cautious.”



Above, Gil Ahrens hits a punching bag during a class at Title Boxing Club in Mountain View on July 22. Right, Leah Hwung, owner of Two Perfect Events, works alongside event planner Yoko Okara, left, at the Hensley Event Resources showroom in Brisbane on June 11.



At Pioneer Saloon, a long-standing bar in Woodside, most regulars have come back and colleagues from work are filling up the modest-sized space once again for drinks. Recently, the bar also restarted its regular live music showings.

Angeles Valdez, the sole bartender of the establishment, was serving maskless customers indoors on a recent early Thursday evening. Valdez didn't have a mask herself since most

customers at the bar were long-time, trusted regulars, she said. But when the crowds have picked up in recent nights, she'd opted to put on her mask.

"I kept my mask on because I didn't trust the crowds just yet," Valdez said.

Some of the hesitancy comes as new cases of the more infectious delta variant are being reported throughout San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, where health officers have said the cases

are largely among unvaccinated individuals.

But even as cases increase, an air of cautious optimism remains in the Midpeninsula as Bay Area counties report high vaccination rates: Among people 12 years old and up, 78% were fully vaccinated in Santa Clara County and 80% in San Mateo County as of July 28.

"I'm optimistic," Tang said. "I don't think we would do well if there was another backward-slide shut down."

The vaccines have even empowered high-risk facilities such as the Avenidas Rose Kleiner Center, an adult day clinic in Mountain View, to finally reopen.

At the center on July 23, Loretta Austin helped celebrate a 76th birthday by having one of the seniors play a joyful rendition of "Happy Birthday" on the piano while others at the clinic, still masked, sang along. Celebrating birthdays at Avenidas transitioned to Zoom and phone

calls while the facility was closed for 16 months.

On July 12, Avenidas reopened its doors to seniors at 50% capacity after conditions became safer and all staff members were vaccinated.

"Everybody feels like they're home when they're here," said Austin, the activities manager at Avenidas.

(continued on page 20)



Ballerinas rehearse for the production of "The Rose and the Butterfly: A Love Story" at Bayer Ballet Academy in Mountain View on July 23.



## Gathering

(continued from page 19)

### Businesses make a comeback

Business owners are benefiting from the public's growing confidence to come back in larger numbers.

At the Mountain View Farmers' Market on July 18, a river of people flowed in between vendors, making pit stops at fruit and food stands to try free samples — an offering that was only resumed the prior week.

For Patti Knoblich, the "Apricot Queen" of ApricotKing Orchards

— which sells dried and fresh fruits, nuts and chocolate covered goods — sales have doubled in recent months, at one point going from \$1,000 to \$2,000 "easily," she said.

ApricotKing has had a stand in Mountain View for nearly three decades, during which Knoblich has seen children grow into adults. She cherishes the camaraderie that comes with interacting with customers. But during the pandemic, Knoblich said there were times when the market was a "ghost town."

"It was no fun," she said.

Adrienne Rush experienced even more challenging days in the past year at Title Boxing

Gym, which she opened in Mountain View in 2015. While some gyms were able to adapt to online and outdoor services, Title Boxing Club confronted more limitations due to its location at Mountain View Shopping Center and because the type of workout it offers, which requires special equipment like heavy bags, doesn't easily lend itself to online or outdoor classes.

"We were closed with no revenue," Rush said.

But with capacity restrictions now gone, Rush said she can allow more people into group classes, which is the core product of Title Boxing Club. Vaccinated clients can also now take off their

*Clockwise from top left, attendees of Sarah Johnson's celebration of life grab green stickers and wristbands to indicate they are comfortable receiving hugs from others outside the First Presbyterian Church of Palo Alto on July 17. Far West Fungi worker Derick Brown hands Taylor Rose a bag of mushrooms at the farmers market at the Caltrain station in Mountain View on July 18. Jasper, 12, creates a huge bubble for 5-year-old Alice, far left, to jump into at a summer park pop-up event hosted by the city of Mountain View at Cuesta Park on July 7.*



*People walk around the farmers market at the Caltrain station in Mountain View on July 18.*



masks as they exercise.

"It's good to see people taking care of themselves," Rush said. "So many people have told me that they're so glad to be back because people have gained weight and were under stress."

### COVID has left its mark

Though people are eager to gather and lives have begun to move forward, the impacts and trauma of the pandemic are still felt today.

Grace Kim, a 17-year-old recent high school graduate, was at Bayer Ballet Academy on July 23 for a six-week summer intensive, as the school was rehearsing for a new production, "The Rose and the Butterfly: A Love Story."

For several months, the academy held group classes at an outdoor studio, complete with wood floors, mirrors, barres, fans and other fixtures. Some instructors taught remotely, while others taught in-person while significantly adjusting the way they interact with the dancers.

"I think COVID has left that mark on us," Kim said. "We're still a little scared to get too close."

Rehearsals this summer were particularly significant for the academy. The production will be the first live and in-person performance since December 2019, which will open at Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts. Previously the school had resorted to pre-recorded shows online, which stitched together separate recordings of the dancers. According to Christine Wood, Bayer's administrative assistant, the academy finalized the contract to perform at the Mountain View center a few weeks ago.

At the Palo Alto memorial service, Johnson's daughter and

son, Lynn Hoffman and Stephen Johnson, were thankful to at last join their mom's closest friends in remembering her vibrant life.

Their mother's death at the age of 81 came to the family as a shock, Hoffman said. A memorial service, surrounded by loved ones, offered Hoffman some comfort. But before the ceremony, the daughter spoke of the frustrations she still had and continues to push herself through till this day.

"I'm very mad and sad," said Hoffman, who directs blame toward the Trump administration's handling of the pandemic. "It's one of those things that was just so unnecessary, in my opinion."

For Hoffman, working through the anger involves delving more into "political activity" like her mom. Recently, she worked on get-out-the-vote campaigns and was proud to share that she helped Andy Kim, a Democratic U.S. representative, get re-elected in New Jersey, where Hoffman currently resides.

But time hasn't made it easier to cope with her mom's passing just yet.

"The whole COVID thing is still shocking," she said.

Thinking about the significance of having in-person services, Pastor Gibson had two perspectives to offer during an interview — one more theological and the other more broadly existential. As Christians, she said, "God comes to us in flesh to one another, just as God came to us in Jesus."

As humans, Gibson said, there will always be something about in-person interactions that Zoom conferences can never replace.

"Human beings were made so all of our senses want to connect," she said. "I just think that's really essential to what it means to be human." ■

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**About the cover:** Andy Z performs on the stage with his puppet Como C. Llama at Magical Bridge Playground in Mitchell Park in Palo Alto on July 23. Photo by Magali Gauthier. Cover design by Douglas Young.

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*Clockwise from top left, Tom Reavis, general manager and head trainer at Title Boxing Club, demonstrates a move during a class in Mountain View on July 22. Bartender Angeles Valdez pours a beer for a customer at the Pioneer Saloon in Woodside on July 22. Ken Clark reads a book in the fiction section of the main library in Menlo Park on July 22.*



*Children dance during a concert at Palo Alto's Magical Bridge Playground in Mitchell Park on July 23.*