

# When the virus canceled his 90th, neighbors stepped up

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That is what some folks on the East Side of Providence decided to convey to an aging neighbor who lives on his own.

His name is Philip McMaster, and he has traveled a journey of nine decades, much of it with his beloved wife, Betsy.

Sadly, three years ago, he lost her.

And so, as he recently approached his 90th birthday, Philip, a retired doctor who now paints watercolors, took it upon himself to invite friends over to mark the day.

But he fell briefly ill beforehand and had to reschedule.

Then the coronavirus restrictions canceled that day, too.

His 90th seemed destined to be unmarked, a disappointment, but Philip let it go — he comes from a generation that does not seek attention out of the ordinary.

But mindful that the elderly are particularly isolated these days, his neighbors decided to make a fuss over him anyway.

You might not see that on most blocks anymore, but this is a special one — this tree-lined stretch of Lloyd Avenue just west of Thayer before the shops start.

It's a gracious block of shingle colonials and brick manses that harkens to times when all neighbors knew one another. Not only is there an annual block party, but also a seasonal dinner of a dozen "Ladies of Lloyd," as they are known.

**On the morning** of Philip's canceled party, one of those ladies texted another, Sally Barker, to suggest they resurrect the event with a street version — the whole block leaving semi-isolation at 5:30 p.m. to surprise Philip.

Sally, 70, a retired RISD adjunct professor who still gives adult classes, is known on the block as a convener of things.

She sent messages to all and soon had everyone aboard, with one "Lady of Lloyd" baking brownies to bear candles.

The governor had yet to restrict gatherings to five, but all were mindful of distancing — so word went out to bring pots to bang so those standing afar could make their presence known.

Philip McMaster had awakened that morning at 6:30 am. With the world shut down, his days are spent mostly at home, though when weather allows, he enjoys a walk to downtown's lovely river, then back up the hill.

He and Betsy moved here almost 30 years ago when he was offered a job teaching at Brown. Before that, he was an immunologist with the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda.

He felt an instant fondness for Rhode Island.

“People here were so welcoming and wonderful it was astounding,” he says.

The day of the planned party was sunny but chilly, so Philip chose to forgo his walk. His eye went to pictures of Betsy in the living room and he remembered her gifts as cook, gardener and the best companion he could have hoped for.

“She was all you need,” Philip would say.

**He grew up** in Cambridge, went to Princeton and met her while he studied at Johns Hopkins medical school when a friend suggested there was a young social worker he should date named Betsy.

He tried calling, more than once, but couldn't reach her.

Then one day after a long shift at the hospital, he was leaning, exhausted, by an elevator when a young woman eyed his nametag and said, “I think I was meant to meet you.”

It was Betsy, a good-looking brunette.

If you ask now what drew him to her, he will say this:

“Everything.”

They had two sons, and 60 full years together.

**Betsy remained** a social worker and Philip, who has a thirst for change, decided at age 55 to become a psychiatrist, beginning residency alongside 20-somethings.

He went on to work at Pawtucket's Community Counseling Center, retiring at 70.

He was 87 when he lost his cherished Betsy.

Three years have passed, but if you ask, he will tell you it is no easier today.

“You miss her all the time,” he says.

As the day of his canceled party moved along, Philip was a bit wistful about it. He had been looking forward to the company.

Soon it was 5:30 p.m. and he began to think about the dinner he would have alone.

He did not know that in the last minutes, neighbors had begun to walk out of their homes onto Lloyd Avenue.

Jenny Schweich was among them. The scene was like a moment of collective freedom, everyone emerging onto the street at once. She counted over 20 souls.

A 90th birthday, she thought, is not a thing that should go unmarked. She was grateful her block had made sure it would not be.

**Someone rang** Philip’s bell, then retreated.

Philip walked past the pictures of Betsy and opened the door.

He was astonished at what he saw.

And heard.

He was greeted with a block-long chorus of Happy Birthday, followed by the banging of pans.

A small table was in front of his house, bearing brownies and candles.

Philip would later say it touched his heart, describing it with a phrase emblematic of his years: “It was just swell.”

Despite everyone’s six-foot separation — more like 10 feet really — Jenny Schweich felt the moment reclaimed something important, a sense of reconnection in an isolated time.

It went a half-hour as folks, one at a time, took a brownie, and Philip walked the block to thank his neighbors at a safe distance for their kind gesture.

Finally, everyone waved goodbye, slowly retreated, and Philip, too, went back inside.

He was sorry Betsy hadn't been there to see it, but in a way, he felt she was there in spirit, through the warmth of the neighbors she had loved so dearly.

Philip says it's a night he won't forget.

He says it's a reminder he is not alone at all.