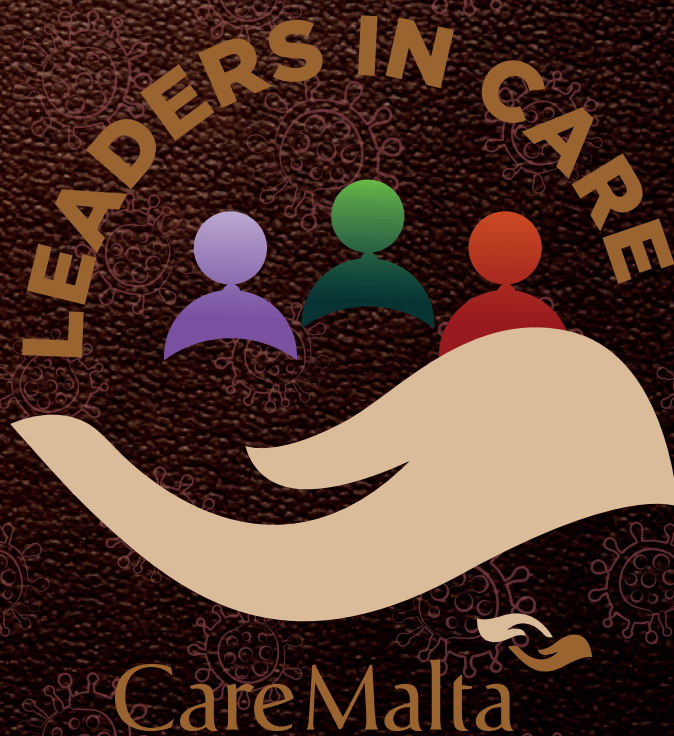


SPECIAL EDITION 2020

CareNet



CareMalta



we were in this together

Who could have ever imagined that the long-awaited 2020 would bring with it a pandemic – that not only turned our lives upside down, but changed the face of the world.

But what a roller-coaster ride of emotions these past four months have been, especially for the management team and staff at CareMalta, who from the pandemic's onset had to take tough decisions and fight against all odds to protect the vulnerability of its residents!

Having witnessed first hand each and every step of this long but worthwhile journey with our staff and residents, who lived side by side 24/7 without being able to see their loved ones, we took the decision to document this strange 10-week period, day by day, month by month, phase by phase, as it will one day go down in history.

The most beautiful and rewarding part of this amazing experience is that everyone was in it together. For both our residents and staff, the journey had its happy and sad moments, with shoulders to lean on and comforting hugs much needed at times.

The company's lockdown has left a mark on us all, serving to put our priorities into perspective and to teach us that our elderly have so much more to offer the community.

I hope that you will enjoy reading the magazine as much as I have enjoyed meeting the people behind the stories inside it.

As our CEO, Natalie Briffa Farrugia, has pointed out in her message on page 2, our residents are the true protagonists of what we have achieved. They have been a rainbow of hope during dark times.

Meanwhile, our mission to safeguard them does not end here. We promise to continue following the situation meticulously, while offering residents the best of care through our core values of compassion, engagement and professionalism.

We need to stay safe, but as long as we are in this together, there's always a ray of light!

Happy reading!

Simonne Schembri
Editor



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THE ELDERLY – ‘A RAINBOW OF HOPE IN AN AGEIST SOCIETY’

CareMalta CEO NATALIE BRIFFA FARRUGIA talks about a deep spirituality during the pandemic – a source of positivity and strength during those moments of stress and fear.

COVID-19 took everyone by surprise. My very first thought was how we would protect our residents, each and every one of them. There would have been serious repercussions on the nation's healthcare system had we not tackled this immediately from our end.

Personally, the 10-week lockdown was a very special time. Despite peaks of stress, strain and fear, I enjoyed a sense of inner peace throughout the entire journey. It was also a time of hibernation and deep spirituality.

While our people were serving at the forefront, I was always present in the background, ensuring everything ran smoothly. I'm pleased to say that all the teams who needed to take the lead did so with perfection.

The lockdown journey also helped reinforce what I strongly believe in – living by my values no matter what. There were everyday things before the pandemic, such as hearing Mass or training, which I thought I couldn't do without. But I did, resorting to other ways of being spiritual and

reducing my hours of training, to give priority to more pressing issues.

Believing in what we were doing filled me with the positivity and strength needed during this difficult time. Apart from being positive, I also value the individual, thus eliciting a lot from each and every person. Therefore, the people surrounding me were also a huge inspiration.

Working from home was my toughest challenge during the pandemic. I was physically present for my two daughters, while my mind was focused on my role, position



Residents at Casa Arkati during the lockdown

and responsibilities day and night. Play, physical contact and regular daily patterns eventually did the trick.

Looking back, a moment from this strange but beautiful journey which I will surely never forget is when we found out we had seven positive cases among employees at Zammit Clapp, Bormla Home and Casa San Paolo.

It happened on Good Friday (April 10) and, on that particular day I couldn't stop thinking about the hard work we had put in and the possibility that our efforts to keep the residents safe would all be in vain. But it was a huge relief to find out on Easter Sunday that tests carried out on all the other employees resulted negative.

On the other hand, an encouraging moment was when we issued the lockdown call to staff members and, 12 hours later, we had 540 people ready to move into the elderly homes for the first three weeks.

While we surely lived by our values throughout the worst time of the pandemic, I will end my message with words of humbleness and caution. Even though the plan we implemented was carried out with the intention to avoid what was happening in other countries, ultimately, COVID-19 could have taken us over – even with all the good measures we had in place. I feel blessed that the pandemic didn't overtake us.

Yes, we implemented our strategy at the right time. But our decision was in turn complemented by a host of other good measures. We couldn't have done it on our own.

The fact that visits were halted by the health authorities with immediate effect, on March 12, had a significant impact.

While we went the extra mile by moving our staff into the homes, our contingency plan was also in line with the closure of schools, churches and other institutions. Everything happened on the same day, at the right time. The first positive case happened on March 7. By March 12 everything was closed.

Looking back, I can say these 10 weeks felt like 10 years. Each employee who took part in the company's lockdown initiative has surely lived up to the company's values



and I Care mission – more than could ever be imagined.

A sad reality from this experience – and this is very personal – is that none of the families ever considered taking over the care of the elderly. Had this happened, I'm aware of the fact that it could have created more issues. I'm not saying a lot of families were able to; on the contrary, many

couldn't. But the possibility was never on the agenda.

This puts yet a bigger responsibility on us, as service providers, and on the profession in general – which surely is worth more recognition. Even though gerontology is all about end of life, it shouldn't be placed at the end of the line.

On the other hand, I truly appreciate the government's official recognition of the good work and commitment by long-term care service providers through the €2 million grant given to 40 homes.

As I constantly followed what was going on in other countries, my biggest fear was that we live in an ageist world that looks down at the elderly in terms of their contribution to society.

But they are the ones who sacrificed the most – not being able to go out or see their loved ones – during this pandemic. Thinking of all that the elderly have been through, I believe they are the ones who saved our country. They are a 'rainbow of hope'.

“Even though gerontology is all about end of life, it shouldn't be placed at the end of the line”



‘THANK YOU FOR MAKING A DIFFERENCE’

Vassallo Group chairman NAZZARENO VASSALLO has only words of appreciation and gratitude for all the teams who spent a number of weeks living with residents in a bid to keep them safe. He says the pandemic has been one of the toughest challenges the Group has had to face in its 74-year-long history.

Nazzareno Vassallo walks into the Group's head office in Mosta right on time on June 4 – the Group's anniversary – ready to face a long but meaningful day ahead.

Together with his son Pio, who heads the Group, and his daughter Natalie Briffa Farrugia, CEO of CareMalta, Mr Vassallo visited CareMalta and HILA homes, as well as Cater-Essence and Learning Works, where he distributed COVID-19 commemorative plaques in recognition of the hard work and determination shown by all the teams involved in the 10-week lockdown initiative during the pandemic.

“Today is also a very significant day for us, as it marks the anniversary of Vassallo Group, which started to operate just after the end of World War II in 1946,” he says with a smile that transmits both a sense of pride in how the company has grown – thanks also to his children who share the same passion for the work they do – and the challenges this poses, especially during COVID-19.

Mr Vassallo, together with members of the management team, started off the day at

“Your work is truly a vocation based on love and respect towards the people whose care you are entrusted with”

Group, as we all start working towards making our 75th anniversary next year a memorable one.”

Mr Vassallo strongly believes that the Group's workforce is an integral part of its growth.

“It presents big challenges to ensure there is enough work, while working to provide the opportunities for them to advance in their career. Having seen the company grow from nothing, having so many employees is a huge responsibility, even more so now that COVID-19 has brought the world to its knees, wreaking havoc in all sectors.

“As has happened with many organisations, the pandemic has had a negative impact on the Group. Both the closure of the airport, as well as the staggering situation within the tourism industry, had an immediate adverse effect on the Group's investment in the catering and hospitality sectors. The overall economic impact of the pandemic has led to negative consequences on other areas.

“In all honesty, the current scenario has been one of the toughest challenges our Group has had to face in its 74-year-long history. However, our main objective has always been – and remains – to safeguard jobs, thus guaranteeing a bright future for all. I am confident that together we can overcome the challenges, safeguard what we have achieved together for many years and keep getting positive results and most importantly keep making a difference in the life of so many people, particularly the most vulnerable in our society.”

Mr Vassallo hopes that the situation will return to normal as soon as possible, “so that together we can pick up where we left off, especially now that the Group will soon turn 75”.

Looking back, he admires those people who, for a number of weeks and months, left everything behind to dedicate themselves totally to their job and to our residents.

“I thank you from my heart for all that you've done. What you have done was nothing short of a heroic gesture that entailed a lot of sacrifice and resilience. It also shows that you look at your job as more than just work. For you it is truly a vocation based on love and respect towards the people whose care you are entrusted with.”



Nazzareno Vassallo presenting a COVID-19 commemorative plaque to James Sciriha at the Group's Head Office in Mosta with, from left, Natalie Briffa Farrugia, Mario Debattista, Chris Gauci, Lee Xuereb, Pio Vassallo and Charlo Bonnici.



Nazzareno Vassallo with the team at Casa Arkati after presenting the COVID-19 memento to senior nursing manager Noel Borg.

the Group's head office, where the first plaque was presented to CareMalta's Central Support Team, headed by director James Sciriha, who worked round the clock to ensure that the lockdown in all elderly homes ran smoothly.

During the second presentation at Casa Arkati, CareMalta's first private home, having opened its doors in August 1993, Mr Vassallo

praised senior nursing manager Noel Borg, who led the team during the lockdown.

“On this day, rather than you coming to us to pick your Shine Award, we are coming to you with this memento to say thank you for your dedication towards keeping our residents safe during the pandemic. CareMalta has truly been a star player throughout this journey. This is also an important day for the

‘THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE I HAVE FACED’

Health Minister CHRIS FEARNE commends CareMalta’s successful efforts, saying the way the company managed the situation has prevented many COVID-19-related deaths.



This pandemic caught the world by surprise, and the fact that studies could not give us a clear indication of the virus’ characteristics or patterns made the situation even more challenging.

However, despite the limited information available, by the time Malta had its first COVID-19 case we had already kicked off our prevention strategy, which involved increasing manpower and purchasing more equipment to make sure that Mater Dei would be able to take on severe cases.

I must admit this has been the biggest challenge I have faced as Minister for Health (so far), and at times the responsibility on my shoulders was tough to carry. However, our excellent team of healthcare professionals, which was quick to react, efficient to adapt and which worked in harmony, gave us a fighting chance of beating this pandemic in a relatively short period.

During this pandemic, my medical background was crucial when taking certain tough decisions. As a doctor and surgeon, I had never experienced such a pandemic. However, I was confident that the steps taken to safeguard the population would bear the desired result.

“CareMalta did its best to ensure the safety of the elderly, who were and still are the most vulnerable to COVID-19 complications”

I have been working with Prof. Charmaine Gauci for years and we share a very good working relationship which pre-dates my appointment as Minister for Health. This was another advantage during the pandemic, as all key players already knew each other well and this allowed us to work in a harmonious, swift manner. Prof. Gauci did an excellent job as Superintendent for Public Health, with my full support. Once again, I publicly thank her for her service.

COVID-19 taught us that a healthy economy leads to a healthy healthcare system. Had Malta not been in a good economic situation when the pandemic struck, the healthcare system would not have been able to adapt so efficiently to the country’s needs.

The pandemic was a period of bittersweet emotions. I recall the heavy heart with which I announced the first COVID-19 death, but also the sense of pride when I announced the first day with no new cases. This is a period I will never forget.

The pandemic was a strain on all of society. However, certain sectors of the population experienced a bigger emotional strain than others, our elderly being one of the most affected cohorts.

CareMalta did its best to ensure the safety of the elderly, who were and still are the most vulnerable to COVID-19 complications. I believe that the way they managed the situation prevented many COVID-19-related deaths. I commend their successful efforts!

‘CAREMALTA WAS AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE PANDEMIC’

CHARMAINE GAUCI, Superintendent of Public Health, talks about how a team of skilled people all worked together to deal with COVID-19, a matter of national priority.

At the start, when the coronavirus was spreading in China, we were hoping that this would take the same trajectory as SARS, where Malta was not affected, but we did not rely on hopes and set a team to work on a preparedness and response plan. This came very useful as COVID-19 spread throughout Europe.

As Superintendent of Public Health, my qualifications, training and experience in dealing with outbreaks were essential in being able to deal with such a matter of national priority.

Members from the public health sector all came on board with their various skills and competences to deal with the situation. Consequently, the public health COVID-19 response team was set up to handle all public health aspects of the pandemic in liaison with primary care, Mater Dei and other sectors.

When you see the team effort of so many skilled people, it gives you the assurance that one is going in the right direction. Personally, I was probably at the right place and at the right time to take up this responsibility. This took up all my concentration, apart from other urgent matters which still had to be dealt with. My family time was reduced drastically but their support was crucial.

My colleagues and I were all very busy, fully engaged with the COVID-19 pandemic. This involved a lot of evidence-based building, operational planning and implementation. We started from a small team, which eventually grew to hundreds of people working on COVID-19, including volunteers who came from everywhere.

Looking back at the work we carried out in the first weeks, it felt like years of work. It was amazing how we started off with a few tests done in people's houses, to move on to having four testing hubs and having performed over 100,000 tests.

We started with manning the helpline with two people, including myself, to having a fully-fledged call centre. A few beds in the Infectious Diseases Unit at Mater Dei expanded to hundreds of beds at Mater Dei, Boffa and a private hospital.

Innovation was at its best – primary care set the ball rolling for innovation with telemedicine for the follow-up of positive cases in the home. Our data management system rolled out in

a super-efficient way over a couple of days. Digital health made great advances with the rollout of the web-based symptom checker. We moved along, dealing with the current situations while planning ahead for next phases and expected scenarios.

This pandemic brought about many emotional moments. A highlight was when I saw all public health specialists, environmental health officers and so many volunteers coming to join the team. The sense of ‘we are all in this’ made me feel secure.

Worst moments were when we had patients who passed away. We took a very important decision in protecting vulnerable people and this is how we managed to keep the numbers that required admission to hospital, as well as deaths, low. Announcing deaths was very emotional.

The most challenging aspect of this pandemic is the fact that we don't know what will happen. Uncertainty challenges the mind, as you cannot deal with what is beyond your control. This pandemic has heightened uncertainty over the economy, employment, finances, relationships and, last but not least, physical and mental health.

“The most challenging aspect is the fact that we don't know what will happen”

CareMalta was at the forefront of the pandemic, having been the first to start with lockdown. This model had an advantage: since staff and residents were locked in together, the residents didn't have to stay in their rooms to be protected from the risk of infection.

Other models with no lockdown still managed to control the pandemic; however, this required more stringent control measures. The efforts made by homes for the elderly are commendable as they were crucial to control the spread of the virus and prevent deaths.

Malta took an approach of wide testing, isolation of positive cases and quarantine of contacts while at the same time protecting the vulnerable. There was also frequent testing within homes for the elderly for both staff and residents.



‘YOU DID US PROUD’

MICHAEL FALZON, Minister for the Family, Children's Rights and Social Solidarity, thanks all the efforts by private, Church and State homes, saying Malta served as a role model during COVID times.



No country in the world ever expected, or imagined, that circumstances could ever arise that would change our entire lifestyle, work schedules, hobbies, habits and interaction. However, this has happened, with the outbreak of COVID-19.

We have had to adjust and alter the so-called normality we were used to. The risk of severe illness from the virus increases with age, with our older generation becoming, and still being, at risk.

We have seen countries, such as Italy and Spain, which were unable to deal with their elderly patients, not having adequate resources to maintain effective hospitalisation, intensive care and ventilators to help them breathe and thus save their lives.

Malta, on the contrary, has managed to combat the Corona outbreak in a well-organised manner. The health authorities

have worked extremely well in handling the situation, from its very outset.

As soon as the first patients were medically certified as suffering from the virus and also being well aware of the associated risks among the elderly community, we took the necessary steps, even if they looked harsh and difficult to follow at the time. The government, in fact, decided to stop visits to care homes in March. We opted for this measure, with the main aim of helping limit the risk of the virus spreading among older persons.

In this difficult scenario, residential homes proved to be and, still are, an asset to our country. They did and still are doing a professional job in curbing the spread of the virus.

I personally thank here all the efforts by private, Church and State residences during such tough times. The results speak

loud and clear, especially when compared to the mortality rates of other countries.

In recognition of their excellent and valuable work, the government felt the need to thank 40 elderly homes during these tough times by officially allocating to them €2 million in funds as financial aid.

Finally, I cannot but once again express my heartfelt thanks to all those involved in the care of our older generation.

You did us proud!

‘TOGETHER WE DID EVERYTHING IN OUR POWER TO PROTECT THE ELDERLY’

SILVIO PARNIS, Parliamentary Secretary for Active Ageing and Persons with Disability, says CareMalta's 10-week lockdown was a very brave initiative.



As has been stated by the health authorities numerous times, the elderly are among those most susceptible to COVID-19. Therefore, the role of all those working in this sector was among the most crucial ones in our country, especially over these past five months.

During the peak of the pandemic in our islands, CareMalta initiated a 10-week lockdown in all its elderly homes. This was a very brave initiative which, together with the drastic measures implemented by the government, helped to protect the most vulnerable.

Once again, I would like to thank all those who work in the elderly sector. I am extremely proud of you and your precious work. After all, if it wasn't for your dedication, we would not be having these positive results. During COVID-19, I, together with the CEO responsible for residential homes for the elderly, visited all homes in which

the workers were in lockdown with the residents. Therefore, I had the opportunity to witness your dedication and hard work in person.

You are those who during the pandemic replaced the residents' relatives and friends and did everything in your power to keep them happy. I am very thankful for the fact that, even though you all have your own families, you still chose not to abandon older persons during such testing times.

It was also an honour for me to see that the government has also included residences for older persons in its €900 million regeneration plan. The €2 million grant given to the 40 private, Church and government homes serves as a token of appreciation for the commitment shown during these months.

I would like to thank you once again from the bottom of my heart. Let us all keep working together to carry on protecting the elderly and ensure that services offered to them continue to be strengthened.

SWAB SQUAD

Nurses MARIA XUEREB and PAUL SCEBERRAS – who performed a total of 665 swab tests for coronavirus on members of staff during the 10-week lockdown – share their experience.

After having spent three weeks with the residents at Bormla Home, it was time for Maria, a facility manager, to take a break and return to her family and children, whom she missed so much.

However, a few weeks later, she was asked to help out with swabbing employees who were about to enter the third phase of the contingency plan, across the eight elderly homes operated by the company.

"I immediately accepted and gladly stepped into this new role, albeit with some reservation, as I was aware there could possibly be a slight risk. The nurse in me thought: 'I know there is a risk, but I will do it because I am a nurse, and that is what I do!'," she said.

Thus, she was suddenly part of a two-member swab squad with her work colleague Paul, who is mental health services manager with CareMalta's sister company HILA.

"In light of the current COVID-19 situation, the company has taken the rightful decision to close all elderly homes in order to keep its vulnerable residents safe. Part of this process included testing staff members for coronavirus prior to entering the homes and living with the residents during the pandemic," Paul said.

This was a lengthy process which involved carrying out swab tests for 665 employees.

Both Maria and Paul are grateful for the support they received from head office staff,

who compiled lists of employees to be swabbed daily, ensuring they were contacted and aware of the nurses' visits and preparing the necessary paperwork, including transport and the availability of enough stock of personal protective equipment (PPE).

"Their work and coordination helped facilitate the smooth running of each swabbing session. Carl Caruana, another manager, was part of a central support team, working on the outside to help all facilities," Maria said.

"Apart from being responsible for delivering swabs to Mater Dei Hospital, Carl was also our last port of call every day after a swabbing session, waiting for us with a nice, warm mug and his friendly smile! Before handing the cooler with the collected swabs, we ensured it was properly sanitised, including our folder with the paperwork inside."

Paul said: "For this process to be a success, and to keep as 'clean' as possible, we performed the swabbing tests wearing our PPE, which included masks, visors, gloves and a good amount of alcohol hand rub. Appropriate infection control procedures had to be kept in place, even though we were not operating within a clinical setting."

A typical day started off at head office, picking up and checking all the paperwork. A cooler was always readily available, as it was crucial for all swabs to be kept in a cold environment until delivered.

The next step involved going to Mater Dei to collect the swabs required for the day. These were provided by the hospital's pathology lab upon presentation of the official approval from the Social Care Standards Authority.

"The swabbing procedure came next," Paul explained.

"After all the employees were swabbed, we would reconcile all paperwork and head to Carl, who would deposit the swabs at Mater Dei the next morning before 7am – in order to obtain results within the day."

This experience served to once again put both Maria and Paul in touch with their nursing backgrounds.

"It was a fulfilling job, knowing that all our work was going towards protecting the most vulnerable members of society."



Maria Xuereb and Paul Scerberras after a long day of tests



Rita Cassar, Paul Scerberras and Carl Caruana planning their day.



Paul Scerberras during a swab test

Throughout the months of March, April and May, team leaders experienced first hand what it was like to work both outside and inside the homes 24/7. Here is what they had to say...



JAMES SCIRIHA

"It seems like ages ago since we took the decision to implement our contingency plan and, like many others, I also fear that we are far away from the end.

"However, it is in my nature to be optimistic, so with each passing day and week, I always say we are one day or one week closer to being in a better position than we are today.

"It is natural to doubt what our life would be after all this and there is a big probability that the 'normal' of before will not be the 'normal' of the after. In these tough times we all found new routines, new ways of working and communicating. So, not all is doom and gloom. In a split of a second we all became more flexible, more accommodating and, most importantly, more compassionate towards each other.

"And it is the latter I am most proud of because at CareMalta we pride ourselves in being compassionate. It is also why we took this step to ask our employees to voluntarily live with our residents, to safeguard them from this life-threatening virus. It was not an easy decision but it was the right thing to do and I was certain that our employees would respond to our call because compassion is at the heart of all that they do.

"I am not part of the lockdown but the Central Support Team, which is an amazing group of people working on the outside to ensure our staff and residents are well taken care of. The three days prior to the first phase of our plan were the toughest part of my duties, due to logistical and planning issues. These were the busiest and shortest 72 hours of my life. The amount of work and coordination required is unthinkable but thanks to our Group, we made it. We came together, all of us from different sections, like never before and we made miracles in three days.

"I liaise continuously with our management team in the facilities to make sure all is going well. Those calls have become the most important calls of the day, as they allow me to remotely connect with our people and be there for them more than ever before. I must say that even though I do feel their tiredness at times, I also feel their determination to persevere through this together and I cannot feel prouder of our team."

ROBERT GRECH

"I have been in for one week now. Pretty much everything was already sorted, in terms of logistics, rosters, duties, etc. I found the staff motivated, willing to co-operate and constantly go the extra mile. There is a great feeling of camaraderie, irrespective of grade and role. Both myself and Nicolette Sant are hardly confined to our offices (mine was hijacked and turned into a dormitory!). We are constantly, till late evening, assisting with all that is required and giving the necessary direction and guidance. We work, we wait for news, we celebrate together – just like one big family.

"Although we try to keep the atmosphere positive at all times, there surely is the hard part of this experience. There have been emotional moments too, and very strong ones which I have never encountered throughout my 30 years in the medical sector.

"On another note, necessity is the mother of invention. We are putting to useful practice our problem-solving skills. For toothache, we're suggesting using brandy to rinse the mouth, which seems to be working! We are also using our clinical judgement more often so, not to call the doctor unnecessarily, our nurses and senior carers are rising to the occasion and sharpening their clinical skills.

"We are being supported by our suppliers and staff based at head office. We have managed, through help over the phone, to fix lifts, repair punctures, set up tents... Surely my long years of experience in this field of work has come in handy in one situation or another, more than I would have thought of.

"Before I sleep, I think of my family. I miss home, but, thankfully, they are all doing well. Although I truly didn't have much time to think or plan for this lockdown experience, I am truly enjoying what I am doing right now."



LEE XUEREB

"When the news of the pandemic started to become more of a reality and got closer to home, as a company we decided that we needed to be proactive, especially in view of the vulnerability of our residents.

"While we started out with the standard precautions and extra care, when the first case hit our shores we decided that we were going to have to take some more drastic measures to ensure that safety, one of our core values, was ensured.

"This is how the idea of living with our residents came about and, as we explored and developed how such a tactic could work from an operational, logistical and practical point of view, I realised that I wanted to be an integral part of it.

"I was chosen to provide my support in the Żejtun Home for the elderly, as the current manager was self-isolating, having recently returned from abroad. So I walked in on the first day of the lockdown with little idea of what to expect.

"Żejtun Home was the first home I was assigned to as a manager many years ago, so going back filled me with nostalgia.

"While there were issues in the first few days, as moving out of your own personal home to a communal space is no easy feat for anyone, these were worked through and proved to be only slight glitches.

"After my 10 days were up and I gave a handover to the facility manager, I must say that driving away filled me with a sense of loss."



ANTO MANUEL

"The outbreak of the novel coronavirus – and the disease it causes, COVID-19 – continues to evolve at a rapid pace. With ever-increasing case counts around the world, warnings to prepare, confusion over testing, and school and business closures, it's no wonder that the pandemic has changed our perspective towards life.

"When I received the call from the management to take over Zammit Clapp during the lockdown I was confident about its success, as the home was already equipped with seasoned staff. Leaving family and friends behind and staying at the workplace indefinitely was indeed challenging for all of us.

"However, we took it in our stride. All of us were aware that we were undertaking a big task which could only be successful if looked at as one team. My role was to keep the team together and make each and every staff member feel at home at their workplace.

"After spending 10 weeks, I can proudly say that our team at Zammit Clapp has evolved into an organised system of interdependent roles working towards a common goal – which is to defeat this pandemic.

"As a manager, with full confidence I can say that we are poised to face any challenge. Spending so much time together has helped each and every one of us get to know each other better and build a solid rapport."

DENISE TIERNEY

"My COVID-19 journey so far... at times I feel other people's frustration, desperation, fear and exhaustion. Everyone wants to be heard, people judge, people ask how we are going to overcome this, yet hope shines brightly most of the time.

"Over the past four weeks I have been working as part of a team – mostly from home. It has not been easy, especially trying to explain this situation to my seven-year-old son, who has had to adjust to new realities himself. Yes, it has been tiring. Sometimes, I feel overwhelmed, yet I calm myself through silence and, more than ever, I realise that the importance of being true to myself is vital to keep positive and go forward in life with a great and strong purpose.

"I let go in the hands of who I believe will lead my way. My smile suddenly comes back and I find inner peace. Crisis situations bring out people's true colours. Yet, we need to accept that some people come into our life as blessings while others as lessons.

"I believe that COVID-19 came into our lives exactly when it was meant to, even though it is hard to understand the point of it all, especially when so many people are experiencing pain and struggles. However, we must believe that although such experiences test us and confuse us, they also help us become better people.

"I conclude by sharing with you that I believe there are two kinds of love – a love of ourselves and a love of others. To live is to choose between these two loves. I choose the latter."





NOEL BORG

"Many moments are experienced in life, both personally and professionally. However, a scenario such as this one has never been as daring. We are living in an era challenged by a pandemic, a situation we only dreamt of in our studies but not in our daily lives. Yet, we are experiencing scenes normally seen on the media."

"CareMalta, being at the forefront of elderly care, could not let any risk take over the vulnerable. The understanding of preservation of life has been a driving force behind being part of the lockdown exercise. While people might refer to it as a 'lockdown' of facilities, in reality it is living with the elderly to preserve their safety. The idea is not to lock down but to encourage others to be part of the resident's life, not blocking staff but letting them live with the elderly and practise what they excel in through professionalism, engagement and compassion."

"It is a challenging experience, with many hours of continuous work, personal and shared sacrifices and mental challenges of trying to understand why we do all this. Waking up to work and sleeping at the workplace in the same environment is surely strange for all of us. It is not a question of materialism, but of ethos and spiritual understanding of oneself for the benefit of others."

"This lockdown constitutes our foundation for tomorrow in the values we share and do not bargain or exchange. CareMalta's I Care motto has always been that 'we receive so much more through giving than receiving'. What we are doing is surely a living reality of this."

CARL CARUANA

"Like the vast majority of people worldwide, I feel that we are currently living in a very scary environment, not knowing if the virus is going to affect me or the ones I love. I am also very concerned about the social impact and repercussions affecting our economy and way of life. We are living in fear, not knowing when all this will end."

"At the height of all this turbulence, I have had to accept a new challenge in my career, that of leaving my workplace and setting up an office at home. I am truly grateful to my superiors' decision to allow me to work from home and at the same time being able to look after my vulnerable wife. Not that I ever doubted their sense of respect and care, but this decision came at a time when, as always, I was focused on Zammit Clapp, my residents and my employees."

"My peace of mind is that my substitute is a hard-working and exemplary nursing manager, who is surrounded by a great team of colleagues whose main focus is the resident. A big satisfaction is that my current tasks allow me to assist a wider community, which comprises eight homes and 540 employees who have so far taken part in the lockdown together with 1,600 residents."

"More than a job, this is an opportunity to serve a wider audience and a mission to help, love and care."



JOSETTE GRECH

"Living with the residents for such a long time has made me feel closer to them and showed me how much they appreciate what we do for them. The experience has also showed me how attached to us they have become, which is such a lovely thing."

"There were a lot of ups and downs while I was living at Bormla Home. However, when we had three care workers testing positive for COVID-19 and saw the employees' reaction, I was surprised by how much this brought the team together. I've learnt many life lessons from this amazing journey, basically that the superficial things in life are not important. I can live without my make-up and adapt to difficult situations. Priorities in life matter!"

"I look at the resident with respect. These are the people we should show respect to, even though sometimes we take them for granted."

"Two instances will stay with me for a long while: when I accompanied one of the residents who turned 100 all morning because she could not see very well. Her face was a picture when I told her that all her five children could see her. Another instance was when one Sunday we were on the terrace doing some crafts and, as I took pictures of the residents, no one was interested to talk – which was unusual. In the afternoon, I was called downstairs, only to realise that the crafts which the residents were working on were all stuck on a thank-you picture for me. That was very emotional."





MARIA XUEREB

"We live in fascinating times! Little did we know what was ahead of us as the clock chimed in the new year. The pandemic has become firmly embedded in our national consciousness and here we are with a dramatically changed life.

"Who would have said that I would literally sleep at Bormla Home – on a mattress, in my office. What I gained from this experience over the past three weeks is not something I could have read or heard about during lectures – sharing the emotions felt during this lockdown with colleagues has given me great insight into the micro dynamics of teamwork. I can also truly say that nursing never left me!

"Phase 1 of the live-in was an incredible journey which albeit being part of a very small team within the facility, I feel the work was done with great love and passion towards our residents. Residents and relatives were super appreciative of our efforts and this gave all of us the fuel we needed to go on.

"Each employee seemed to be driven by the desire of meeting the demands of our residents and focusing on their physical, psychological and spiritual needs. Our aim was to see them happy and smile.

"Every morning I asked the Lord for wisdom, in the midst of whatever challenging situation we faced. There was no theory I could have applied to achieve the goal of putting the well-being of our residents at the centre of my work.

"This experience brought a sense of harmony among employees and even when work became exhausting, the collaboration and camaraderie created the supportive environment needed for employees to know that were all in it together."



ANTHONY CARUANA

"The need to be part of our 10-week lockdown, to protect our residents, came on all of us unexpectedly and suddenly, giving us only a couple of days to plan for it logistically and to accept this new reality.

"This situation affected not only us staff members and our families but also our residents and their loved ones, especially those who used to meet up regularly. A huge positive outcome of this experience is that it gave the opportunity to staff members to be more present in the residents' lives and fill the void they felt.

"As one can imagine, moving our lives away from family, habits, hobbies, friends and preferred food to come and live at the workplace is not easy. However, being surrounded by supportive colleagues with similar goals in mind helped make this experience a positive one. Mixing with different nationalities, cultures and age groups, who all adapted to support each other, as well as a feeling of appreciation for our work from relatives and residents, kept us going.

"Proof of this camaraderie between staff is when an emergency arises, even in the middle of the night, and you see staff who are not on duty, going out of their dormitories ready to lend a helping hand. Or, when you see one department supporting another – such as staff from the domestic department taking on basic duties usually carried out by carers so that the care team could dedicate themselves to other care-related duties.

"For us to keep performing well also from an operational perspective, having continuous support from the outside was crucial. Therefore, I take this opportunity to thank all those who gave their input to ease some of the difficulties of this lockdown, starting with the senior management team, to the head office team, the central support team, the CaterEssence team, the facility managers and also all the homes which always supported each other in every situation.

"All of this makes me feel that we truly were in this together."



SIMONE VELLA

"I joined Żejtun Home last September – a journey of almost seven months. I am an easygoing person and felt comfortably well the first time I stepped into the facility. Residents and relatives are humble, bubbly and loud, but loving and sincere. You know where you stand with them. The staff are hard-working and committed.

"Living with the residents 24/7 is an experience I never dreamt could happen but it is an opportunity to facilitate a deeper level of learning and getting to know them and my staff better.

"Emotional moments of family distance and facing the unknown are there but still the commitment to the residents, who are the life and soul of the home, reigns."



MANUEL FENECH

"It was a sudden decision I had to take and communicate to my colleagues, inviting them to volunteer for a lockdown with our residents to keep them safe.

"I hardly had time to think about anything. The only thing that came to my mind was logistics... beds, dormitories, food provision, our residents, relatives, hospital appointments, medicine, hygiene, safety, risks, etc.

"It seemed that my body and stamina both responded very well to this situation, as I felt full of energy, ready to prepare for almost anything. I must admit that I was blessed with a remarkable team who came on board immediately and supported the initiative. We worked well together and although there were a few teething problems, together we found a way of making things happen.

"Furthermore, we were backed by CareMalta's head office, who were supporting us day and night, and by CaterEssence, which provided us with food and other delightful treats.

"It was not easy to shift all rosters to the new workforce. But with the goodwill of all the staff, who were extremely supportive and determined to offer their very best, we managed to keep offering a sterling service to our residents. I witnessed first hand the philosophy behind I Care – that of putting the values of care, compassion and love into practice.

"The kitchen staff managed to provide healthy food not only to the 200 residents but also to the 73 volunteers, each with their preferences according to nationality. Staff from the housekeeping department were continuously on the go. The maintenance team had a lot on their plate, since there were alterations to see to, in order to be able to accommodate and change rooms into dormitories and isolation areas for safety. Staff members from the front office and security departments also did a great job.

"Hats off to the caring staff and active ageing team who, from day one continued with their work to ensure our residents' well-being. Their dedication to wash, feed, distribute medicines and keep them lively was impressive. All this can be expressed in a resident's comment: 'You are my family now!'

"Despite the social distance between our residents and their relatives, we managed to keep them as close as possible and offer them a warm and safe environment. Many people also supported us through social media acknowledgements, others with treats, but we must not forget the support from the Sacro Cuor parish community, who brought the Blessed Eucharist every Sunday."

ROSLYNN VELLA

"I have been bursting with emotions over the past six weeks, as this journey has taken me on a Ferris wheel ride which will be hard to stop. As I reflect on the preceding days leading to March 16, I had my gym bag packed in my car, thinking that the voluntary lockdown with the elderly at Roseville would only last a few days... How wrong I was!

"The Ferris wheel suddenly turned into a roller-coaster ride that has made me dig deeper into things at a rather fast pace. Being here on a 24-hour basis has really opened my eyes in terms of the nature of my work. This is an experience that has exposed me to different facets of my role within Roseville.

"This experience is a learning opportunity. When things go back to normal, we can always go over the way we operate certain things and maybe reflect in order to tweak them to improve the service we offer our residents and their families. When I look at the residents, I see happy faces. I see that they are living this experience positively, even though it's a difficult time. There were some hard times, but then, as we always do, we try to make other days a little more special by organising special activities.

"When we moved into the homes, residents couldn't believe we were all sleeping here. In fact, I had to physically show them where we were sleeping. From that day on, they came knocking at my door, some even offering to give me their private recliners so I could rest better. Others asked me if I wanted to go sleep in their room. It's their way of saying thank you.

"My most precious resource is the staff at Roseville. Supporting them is crucial, as they too feel anxious. Sleeping and waking up with colleagues 24 hours a day has left an impact on everyone.

"Birthday celebrations are a highlight. The fact that residents are getting exposure on social media gives them a bigger sense of looking forward to celebrating such special occasions. We always try to compensate for the absence of their loved ones in the best way we can by filling this void.

"Everywhere you look, there's a strong human element. There's also a great sense of empathy between us, the residents and their relatives because they can understand that we are also missing our families. It's a circle. We are literally living in their shoes."





AMANDA TONNA

"I, together with the rest of the world, am experiencing this pandemic. My daily routine has changed dramatically. Work has become more intense and at times scary because of this situation. For the past month, we have been fully dedicated to keeping our beloved vulnerable ones in the safest environment possible.

"Although Mellieha Home operates only the services, we are still a big part of it because we need to prepare food, see to the upkeep of the rooms, cleanliness and, most of all, the comfort of our residents, especially now that their relatives cannot come to see them. Working together with the nursing sector has made us more united for the same aim – our residents.

"My life has changed too. Just a week after I was appointed to assist our company's senior services manager, I had to take over Mellieha Home once again to help out in this operation. Stress and tension levels are higher than usual but, thanks to one great team, our daily challenges subside in a positive way.

"Employees are practising the company's I Care motto most tangibly and I'm proud to say that this is reflected both in the way they care for the residents as well as from feedback by residents. I feel a sense of satisfaction when residents and their relatives appreciate the work and dedication shown.

"Just a simple thank you can make you and the rest of the team happy. This is my main objective in the circumstances – to keep motivated and not to give up."

NICOLETTE SANT

"An experience like this does not come without its ups and downs. There have been moments where the drive of doing something so extraordinary is enough to give you the energy to push forward, and others where just a single smile from the residents does the trick.

"Leaving your family and the comfort of your home for 10 long weeks is not a gesture to be taken for granted either. We have shared many a happy moment, such as birthdays and anniversaries, together, as well as sombre ones, such as the parting of our residents. The whole experience has been a mixture of emotions.

"As relatives were not allowed to visit, it was up to us to take on the role, not only as caregivers but also as extended family members. For this reason, every Sunday, we organised a memorable event. We played games, re-enacted a TikTok dance, prepared non-alcoholic cocktails, played bingo and held sports days, but the highlight of the 10 weeks was Mother's Day, during which we laid a red carpet for the residents to walk on. They then sat under a decorated arch and had their picture taken before being served lunch in the garden.

"This was a special day for all those mothers who could not share it with their children, for all newly-made friends who shared a picture together and, most of all, for members of staff who also could not see their loved ones. We all came together as one big family."



MARIO DEBATTISTA

"It all started in a sort of rush and urgency. I felt the need to remain calm but was anxious to ensure that all the required planning would be done in time. But time we had not.

"On the first day of the lockdown one could feel a sense of anxiety and fear, having to share the basic needs with so many colleagues, but to a certain extent unknown people, in restricted areas and facilities. Day two, three and four passed and we started to get used to the routine. Some even took on different tasks and here is where one started to note the real change. All became one, all helped support each other, even going out of their way to share everything.

"Some employees, as well as heads of department, have been working long hours, seven days a week, going to rest and seeing them back after a few hours. The majority of residents have been very understanding, with a few also offering to help, especially on seeing the amounts of supplies coming in.

"Last but not least, I am grateful to the army we have outside, our support team and the Vassallo family. They are the backbone of this lockdown. My CEO is my inspiration – a woman with a big heart who constantly thinks of everyone, not only residents and employees, but also our families and loved ones.

"I cannot explain or find the right words to express myself. The reason is just this: what words can I use to thank Natalie, the Vassallo family, my fellow colleagues out there, these colleagues at Casa San Paolo and in other facilities, the relatives of our residents and, yes, also the residents?"



DIARY OF A

SIMONNE SCHEMBRI recounts the lockdown experience in these 10 weekly blogs

Week 1 – March 16-22

Here for one another

It has already been a week since our team of employees joined the residents in our facilities to live with them 24 hours a day – a show of selflessness and integrity!

These are people who have left their families, friends and comforts to fully dedicate themselves to an altruistic cause, just like the rest of those doctors, nurses and workers who are working round the clock, putting their life in danger to help those afflicted by the virus, without thinking twice of the consequences.

It has been a week full of mixed emotions for everyone at CareMalta, especially for these employees who have moved in: a

trace of sadness maybe; many moments of happiness, surely; a bout of loneliness; a sense of pride; and, naturally, even fear. It has also been a strange week for the many residents living in our homes, with their dearest sons, daughters, nephews, nieces, grandchildren, brothers or sisters not being able to visit them every day, like they normally do.

All this in a bid to protect the vulnerability of our residents.

Somehow, in times of crisis, life takes on a new meaning, we appreciate more what we are blessed with and everything else fades into nothing. I'm sure we all feel the same: we would do anything to keep those we love most safe.

With every passing day, we are faced with increasing numbers of people afflicted by the virus. Our streets are deserted and empty and a feeling of gloom pervades the

air. All of us seem to be glued to our laptops, TV screens and social media, on the lookout for news and updates on COVID-19, hoping a newscaster would tell us this whole thing is over. But the virus rages on, crippling the world and putting us all to the test.

However, looking for the positive, even when negativity strikes, will help us get through this difficult moment. Seeing that, up till now, both our staff and residents' spirits are high, fills us with a sense of inner joy and peace of mind, knowing that everybody is to a certain extent safe, cocooned together inside.

Thousands of messages have poured in on our Facebook page, mostly by residents' relatives, thanking us for taking good care of their loved ones. We are humbled by all these well-wishing and thankful posts, and feel gratified, but we are also very aware of the huge responsibility we carry on our shoulders – the well-being and happiness of our residents.

There have been quite a few magical moments since our lockdown kicked off, such as the first Skype call between a father and his daughters from the Mellieha home, a resident couple celebrating their 40th wedding anniversary at Roseville, a son singing his heart out to his mother under her window at Zammit Clapp Hospital Residential Home while she looked on, an elderly resident at Villa Messina singing 'You'll never walk alone' at the full strength of her lungs... all these instances will remain with us forever in our hearts.

Week 2 – March 23-29

The compassion you deserve

As the second week of residential life for both our elderly and employees within the facilities comes to an end, our teams have begun to adjust to 'a new life', making the most of this unique experience – always with the residents' best interests in mind. Today marks the beginning of the third week of the live-in.

We all fear for our loved ones, and, surely, we want the best for them. Even



CASA MARIJA

JOURNEY

CASA ARKATI



BORMLA HOME



than others, while others oblivious to what is going on outside.

As precious life goes on, we do not have enough words to express our gratitude to our employees who continue to transmit messages of hope and positivity. The many pictures and videos being sent to us from the homes will forever remain touching memories of these strange times we are going through.

The week started on a positive note. A number of much-awaited treats – extra clothing and long-life goods – were left outside all facilities by relatives in boxes and bags. These lovingly prepared items are always disinfected before entering the homes as a safety measure.

Week 3 – March 30-April 5

Looking ahead with hope

This past month has been a tough nut to crack for us all. Never did we imagine we would go through such desperate times. And desperate times call for desperate measures, the hardest one of all being social isolation – something we are gradually getting accustomed to, even though still with difficulty.

However, as Prof. Andrew Azzopardi, Dean of the Faculty for Social Well-being at the University of Malta, wrote in the *Malta Independent* on April 1, social isolation has always been there – in various forms.

Death socially isolates us from those we love, physical distance too, as does a disease or a condition, even prejudice or discrimination.

Even though we are all experiencing social isolation at the moment, this time should serve to make us really think of what we cherish most in life. Our loved ones surely take pride of place, followed by our values and beliefs. Every other materialistic pleasure pales in comparison.

These past few weeks have been exhausting, not physically – as we have so much more time on our hands – but mentally and psychologically, as we constantly worry about our loved ones and what could happen to them. Suddenly, we have all the time in the world to reflect on what matters most.

though we miss them physically – touching them, greeting them, hugging them and kissing them – this exercise has been undertaken to protect them against the virus, which we all hope won't take very long to pass.

Meanwhile, this past week has been another eventful one for both residents and staff, full of exceptional moments spent in each other's company, such as celebrating birthdays, dancing to a tune, singing a song, playing a favourite melody on the piano, eating something good, praying in solitude, showing love for one another,

as well as the occasional lonely and uncertain feelings.

What every employee is doing throughout the day, whether they're part of the kitchen team, front office, housekeeping and maintenance departments, carers, nurses or managers, goes beyond their work remit. Caring for someone has taken on a new meaning. It's no longer a job but a vocation.

The elderly, on the other hand, are once again shining like stars on a dark and gloomy night. They are the protagonists. They deserve all our compassion. They are living day by day, some happier and jollier

DIARY OF A JOURNEY



CASA SAN PAOLO

"But the Lord has not left us alone. United in our prayer, we are convinced that He has laid His hand upon us."

Our very first group of employees entered the facilities almost a month ago, on March 16, while today marks the beginning of the second week of the second phase – so, for some, it has already been a six-week-long journey full of good and not-so-good moments.

But this is life, with its ups and downs. Life in normal times is not easy. Life in these extraordinary circumstances is even tougher. Not seeing our loved ones is a big sacrifice. But it is also a small price to pay if we think in terms of their health and vulnerability.

So, let us stay hopeful, positive and safe, and be thankful for being healthy and knowing that our loved ones are doing well and being taken care of.

Residential life in the homes continues pretty much normally. We try to make the most of it, even though we constantly live in fear of the unknown.

Especially now, our team of active ageing facilitators are focusing their attention on keeping the residents energetic and cheerful. Daily chores such as cooking or gardening keep the elderly very much involved and hands-on in their everyday life within the home, while fun activities such as bingo, physical exercise or painting are held regularly to encourage them to remain active and use their brains.

This is very important to us, as a positive atmosphere is conducive to happiness and a feeling of well-being, which are much needed elements in these terrible times.

This is why initiatives such as Care-Malta's lockdown shine in such times of crisis. Because it's a selfless act of love and dedication. It has created an aura of positivity and hope for better times ahead.

Most of the team members who have lived with the residents over the past three weeks have renewed their commitment for another three weeks, along with some others who have now joined them in giving much more than care. Over the past three weeks they have offered the elderly companionship, support and hope at times of loneliness and depression, fed them with dedication and even helped them celebrate a special occasion in the absence of their loved ones.

In turn, this experience has surely filled the employees with mental pictures that can never be erased – a smile, a thank you, a caress, a hug, a good cry, a laugh... and many more human moments.

We're calling the past three weeks Phase 1, but really this whole exercise is a continuous journey with one aim – which was and remains that of placing our vulnerable elderly at the very top, where they deserve to be.

a difficult time for everyone, both on the home front as well as around the world, especially with so many people being directly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In his traditional Easter Sunday message to the world, Pope Francis, in solitude, said we were all in one boat, fragile and disoriented, and that this wasn't the time for egoism, self-centredness, forgetfulness, division or indifference.

Millions of people watched and listened on various media platforms, as the Pope's thoughts turned to those directly affected by the coronavirus. "For many, this is an Easter of solitude, lived amid the sorrow and hardship that the pandemic is causing," he said.



ROSEVILLE

Week 4 – April 6-12

'United in our prayer'

As we adjust to living in coronavirus times, albeit with immense difficulty, time seems to be passing by at an incredible speed

This year will surely go down in Malta's history as a landmark one. So far, it has been



Week 5 – April 13-19

The first 30 days...

Even though living through this coronavirus pandemic hasn't been easy, the time has taught us to adapt to a new way of life, being more appreciative of what we have and what we are blessed with every day.

As we think of our loved ones and look forward to the day when we can finally see them, touch them, hug them and kiss them once again, someday we will all look back and treasure this special moment even more.

The journey for those employees who have made it their mission to protect the vulnerable elderly continues. We have been witnessing, day by day, their relentless drive and selfless mission to keep everyone as safe as possible.

Meanwhile, time ticks away, filling us with hope and great expectations for our elderly loved ones. We all hope this will end well, making us stronger and bringing us closer than ever before.

April 16 marked a significant first milestone. Working hard together, as one team, we have managed, at times painstakingly, to reach the first 30 days of this incredible journey as safely as is humanly possible.

The safety and care of our residents come first. There's no doubt about this. Our mission in life is to care compassionately for each and every elderly resident, even going beyond the line of duty if necessary.

After all, isn't this what our employees did on March 16 when they moved in with the elderly? Isn't this what doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals are doing – being there for the sick, putting their lives at risk?

These acts of altruism fill us with a sense of hope and positivity for better times to come. The multitude of pictures and video clips taken by those working directly with the elderly, the sick and the vulnerable speak volumes not only about these times of suffering but also about the goodness that reigns supreme.

I end this blog on a positive note, hoping that all these commendable efforts will

serve to keep our loved ones safe and protected. After all this is our ultimate aim.

Our CEO, Natalie Briffa Farrugia thanks all those who were, or still are, part of this journey, saying: "My heart is full of gratitude. I augur you blessings, health and strength."

I also include an inspirational quote by Frida Kahlo, shared by one of our home managers as she pondered on her first 30 days: "At the end of the day, we can endure much more than we think we can."

Indeed, we are all much stronger than we think we are. Stay safe.

Week 6 – April 20-26

Fulfilling a mission we started

Our journey with the elderly in these strange times continues, with the same enthusiasm, willingness and determination to do everything in our capability to keep the residents safe as well as happy.

As we enter the third phase of our mission, we feel we have reached yet another milestone, with so much hard work behind us, while looking forward to new, challenging times ahead.

Our elderly residents haven't seen their loved ones since mid-March. But they are well aware of the good cause behind this sacrifice – protecting them as much as we can against COVID-19.

Many elderly have been through thick and thin, especially those who experienced the harsh realities of living during the war. Yes, these people are frail and vulnerable, but they are far more resilient than we make them out to be.

Each phase in our journey has been important, serving both as an eye-opener and a learning curve in our heartfelt mission to care. So far, the experience has been quite a positive one, making us more appreciative of what we already have and filling us with hope.

Our organisation is a unique one, enriched by the people who work for it and feel very much part of it. This unexpected pandemic has brought the management and its team closer together, further strengthening our bond and the core values we embrace.

It has also encouraged our dedicated staff to go beyond their specific duties and reach out to the elderly with open arms. This past week has been another roller-coaster ride of more positive than negative moments for both our residents and staff living together within the facilities.

Apart from celebrating the many birthdays and keeping our elderly virtually in touch with their loved ones, whom they haven't seen for a long time, each team is working round the clock to keep the residents active, well and in high spirits – either

DIARY OF A JOURNEY

by simply doing what they enjoy most, such as cooking, reading, singing, playing an instrument or helping around in the garden, or by encouraging them to join group activities and socialising.

On the other hand, the residents greatly cherish all the sweet gestures, commitment, extra care, kindness, empathy and compassion they receive from their carers and all those they come in contact with.

These are our very own special moments to treasure. Moments that will not come back. These are historic times which future generations will talk about to their offspring, just like we see pictures and hear stories about the past from our parents or grandparents.

While I'm sure that capturing these special instances brings tears of joy to those who see their loved ones happy, the most important thing is knowing that they are receiving all the care they need and that, ultimately, they are safe.

Week 7 – April 27-May 3

Beautiful words keep us going

As time rushes by, our elderly continue to amaze us, regaling us with beautiful life lessons and personal stories worth sharing. This week, I spoke to a few residents over Skype and I can say that it was definitely time well spent.

Every single day we are privileged to hear their stories, their wise words and thoughts during these times of social distancing.

A resident at Roseville, Ina Ciappara, shared an inspirational message, which I will, in turn, share with you. What she said

brightened up my day and made me feel ready to take on anything. I'm sure it will put a smile on your faces too.

Ms Ciappara said she felt blessed to have had a happy life. What matters most to her is the safety of her only daughter during the pandemic.

"She is the most precious thing I have in my life," she told me.

The 84-year-old resident is a happy soul and her positivity instantly rubbed off on me.

As the teams in each home become closer with the residents, we are coming across personal stories such as this one, which continue to fill us with courage and hope.

"Gratitude is a virtue," Ms Ciappara said. "We should be appreciative of and thankful for what we have. What the staff are doing with us is an act of kindness. We must remember that every cloud has a silver lining."

Ms Ciappara loves a good book and enjoys long hours reading in the library or in the garden on a beautiful day.

"I do miss seeing my daughter. But I speak to her every day. I believe there is always light at the end of the tunnel. In any situation life presents you with, you either reach for that ray of light or focus on the darkest part of the tunnel."

Two residents at Bormla Home, Mary Bezzina and Theresa Scicluna, spoke highly of the staff, who have left their dear ones and are caring for the residents 24 hours a day.

"We don't need anything here. We're very happy. We are spoilt for choice when it comes to activities," they both told me.

Despite her age, Ms Bezzina, 91, is full of life. She took a badge out of her bag, lifted it up and showed it off. It said: 'Proud to be from Cospicua.'

On the other hand, Ms Scicluna, 81, is a soft-spoken, good-natured woman, who

moved into the home with her elderly parents 16 years ago because she was very close to them.

The residents and their stories of positivity fill us with energy to keep doing what we do in a bid to keep them as safe as possible.

Week 8 – May 4-10

One-of-a-kind relationships

Last week started on a relatively positive note, with the health authorities easing some of the coronavirus restrictions, making life slightly more bearable for everyone. But caution to practise social distancing persists, as Malta, together with the whole of Europe, enters a new phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since March 16, CareMalta employees have been living alongside the residents in eight facilities operated by the company, in a bid to curb the spread of the coronavirus and keep the elderly as safe as possible.

Week after week, this painstaking journey has been an intensely rich one, full of happy and miserable moments.

As residents themselves have said: "It hasn't been a bed of roses, but with goodwill, patience and determination, we will overcome this. Only when you do not have freedom, do you really miss it. When we had it, we never thought all this would happen. However, we are safe."

Our facility managers and their staff, who have accompanied the elderly day by day with great altruism, compassion, engagement and professionalism, will surely remember these particular moments for as long as they live.

During this journey, they have had the possibility to take the company's I Care values to the next level, by bringing them to life through constant care.

This could not have been possible without the great teamwork and unity of staff members, who all pulled at the same rope, especially when tiring days took their toll.

Their special bond with the residents – listening to them, being there for them, being compassionate, doing little things that make a difference, touching their hand to console them, bringing a smile to their face, telling them it's going to be alright – has filled all employees with extra courage to persevere with offering excellent care, especially during these strange times.

A resident at Casa Arkati, whose husband of 45 years passed away two weeks ago, summed it up in a few words:



ŻEJTUN HOME



MELLIEHA HOME

"They are looking after me hour by hour. I feel safe here."

Compassion, professionalism, engagement. These are key values which make our organisation a cut above the rest.

Week 9 – May 11-17

Dedication till the very end

I remember writing my very first blog, when our employees joined the elderly in their residential homes to live with them and protect their vulnerability at the start of the pandemic. So far, results have been worth all the sacrifices made during this painstaking time.

In a tweet on March 31, the World Health Organisation's regional director for Europe, Hans Kluge, praised Malta for the health measures taken to protect the population and control the spread of the coronavirus. Kluge said Malta was "on the right track and an example to follow".

Nine weeks have passed since March 16, the date when the very first group of 540 CareMalta employees stepped into our elderly homes in a bid to keep the residents safe and sound. It was a huge logistical challenge for the company's management team, who successfully recruited these people in 12 hours.

Understandably, it took the teams in each home time to settle down and get used to not going home at the end of their shift.

It was, and still is, a new reality, a new 'normal' which, like us on the outside, they had to adapt to. Gradually, residential life as we know it started taking shape and picking up the rhythm once again, with both employees and residents becoming a second family to one another.

More than 370 employees have been living with residents for nine weeks at a stretch. Like the residents, they haven't seen their loved ones for a long time. A total of 841 employees have taken part in this voluntary initiative since it was launched.

These people have been the backbone of our mission to safeguard the elderly.

Now, more than ever, with no date in sight as to when all this will end, we need to be strong and look to the future with courage and determination, while ensuring that we stay safe. The well-being of our vulnerable elderly is – and remains – our prime objective.

Meanwhile, as the journey for both our staff and elderly residents goes on, we will continue living our values of compassion, professionalism and engagement day after day, till the very end. Our elderly deserve the best attention and care in the world.

Week 10 – May 18-25

A patchwork quilt woven with love

When a team of people wakes up together, lives together, works together and sleeps together, it's only natural that strong bonds form, new relationships are born while others strengthen even further.

This is what our employees have experienced over the past 10 weeks, a hard but beautiful experience with each other and with their residents.

As the lockdown period is lifted, our aim is to continue protecting our vulnerable residents and to provide rules and regulations to maintain necessary infection control measures for all employees during their working hours in their respective facilities.

As this journey comes to an end – some team members have already left the facilities, a few others are leaving soon – all those who took part have surely contributed to making the lives of our vulnerable elderly happier and safer. And this is no mean feat.

It was tough at the very beginning, as the challenges were many, but being in this together has proven that a burden shared is often a burden halved. All the teams worked hand in hand, all for one and one for all, in the best interests of the residents.

The end of the lockdown period signifies another phase during these difficult times of social distancing – one during which we still need to strive to ensure the safety of all our residents, and this is what we intend to do.

When the COVID-19 pandemic first struck, the company was the first to take precautionary measures by sending 841 employees to live alongside the elderly in its homes.

This was a huge project from beginning to end, starting with the management team, who worked tirelessly and were immensely supportive, taking the necessary decisions to implement their plan, to the 'invisible' work of so many people who lent a hand to make this happen. Last but definitely not least, to the real protagonists of this journey – those many dedicated individuals who didn't think twice about leaving their families and loved ones in order to accompany the residents on this difficult journey, persevering till the very end.

This past week has been a week of goodbyes for some of our staff. It was emotional to see some of them leave and reunite with their loved ones whom they hadn't physically seen in a long time.

Some moved into the homes on their own, leaving their husbands and children, others lived alongside the residents as a family to be together, while a few others continued to perform their work notwithstanding personal problems that cropped up along the way.

This is our story – a story about special people living special, unforgettable moments.

Our journey together reminds me of a patchwork quilt, woven by different people. Each piece of cloth, in different designs, colours and textures, creates an end product that is mismatched but truly unique.

Each diverse individual along this journey has left a mark on a massive patchwork quilt woven with love. All the parts, when put together, produce one big, meaningful experience for all.

LET'S DO IT! LET LOVE SHINE THROUGH!

Throughout the 10-week lockdown journey, our CEO, Natalie Briffa Farrugia, kept in touch with all the teams involved regularly. Here are some of her messages of hope, positivity, encouragement, gratitude and appreciation during the pandemic.

"A first week of fears, anxiety, challenges, tiresome days and what more... this was one first miraculous week where we not only did what we had to do, but also witnessed the result of our dedication, love and commitment derived from moments/things that can only be described as 'providential grace'." – ***inspired by the start of the lockdown on March 16***

"I'm sure each and every one of you is perfectly chosen to be here – at this very moment. I'm sure you all fear, you're all anxious and you all doubt. Let us live our fears, our doubts, our anxiety by living our values to the full. Our life, compassion, dedication and strength will overcome anything time will present us with."

"May you all be blessed, as we take the most caring step in CareMalta's history so far. I'm sure this is the best occasion the management team has daringly and willingly risen up to. Once again, our decisions, processes and thoughts are being executed exclusively with the resident in mind."

"Grateful and humble thanks to you all. Please know that I am here for you, day and night. Also, remember the open door policy for each and every person on your team. We do this freely and willingly."

"We are all on equal ground from now on. We are one team called to serve. There are no weak or strong among us. We are here for one another, and this strength will protect our vulnerability."

"This is the moment when we are all called to witness what we truly are and what we were created for – to love and serve others and to protect the vulnerable under our care."

"I wish you all a heart full of generosity, the strength of a lion and the grace that we will all continue to live through this together."



"I thank you for respecting each other, even though distant. I thank you for representing CareMalta on the frontline"

"Throughout my career, I have always striven to do the work that fulfilled me as a person and that directly or indirectly makes a difference in someone else's life. I have established this as the mission in my life, be it in the classroom as a teacher, in Ethiopia as a volunteer or at CareMalta, first in operations and now as CEO. I also do this as a mother of two girls. At the end of the day I want to look at myself in the mirror and ask whether I managed or failed to stick to my mission."

– on May 4, which marks the second anniversary of I Care, the language of compassion, professionalism and engagement with our residents

"This time serves as preparation for the next phase, which might not be any easier than previous ones or those to follow." – inspired by Week 6, the start of the second phase of lockdown, as the nation celebrates with Maltese flags flying high, having only one positive case and many recovered cases

"Despite our logical minds, my responsibilities as CEO of the CareMalta Group and shareholder of the Vassallo Group, and the financial challenges our mother company will face during this pandemic, my hope comes only from above." – **inspired by the fact that the Easter figolli were still baked this year and given out to all residents during the lockdown**

"In the darkness of your hearts, you have lit a flame that is burning out so brightly that our lives are full of perseverance, unity and silver linings."

"These are special times, where most of the time we are fighting an 'invisible war', with hope in an 'invisible God'. Thank you for all your invisible love, invisible work, invisible sweat and invisible care."

"Despite the fact that fear is our greatest temptation right now, you have not let this feeling paralyse you, you did not give in, you have not stopped loving, you have not let the gloom of sorrow overtake you. On the contrary, in simple but extraordinary ways your gestures of care fill us all with hope."

‘AN ENRICHING LIFE EXPERIENCE’

CareMalta director JAMES SCIRIHA says he feels honoured to have led and been part of the Central Support Team during the company’s 10-week lockdown journey.

The COVID-19 outbreak presented us with a crisis management scenario, which the organisation had to quickly respond to by adjusting work practices in a continuously fluid environment, while maintaining the health and safety of individuals.

I recall emotions of fear at the thought of what the implications could be if the virus found its way into one of our homes. However, out of that fear came the idea and the drive to lead our organisation into the yet unknown territory of a lockdown, feeling hopeful more than ever that as a Group we could respond and overcome the imposed challenges, and positive that our employees would respond to our call.

On March 13, a decision was taken to close the doors of our homes and ask our employees to live along with our residents 24/7.

That weekend was not an ordinary one, possibly the busiest one to date for me. In 48 hours we created a management structure to sustain each and every home, as well as a central support team to back the homes from the outside.

We tackled numerous logistical and operational matters: we set up sleeping quarters and housekeeping facilities, issued protocols on deliveries and fumigations, rolled out staff menus and meals, as well as IT infrastructures and a new way of operations, not knowing how long we were in this for and the cost it would entail. Yet, we made it happen, thanks also to the support and flexibility of all departments within the Vassallo Group.

It was decided with our CEO, Natalie Briffa Farrugia, that I stay on the outside to lead and manage the whole operation. The first few days were the most thrilling since we were not fully aware of what we were to expect and still had to solve a few teething problems. However, as a result of multiple swift decisions, the operation turned out to be quite smooth.

Staff were rotated every three weeks, some extending their stays for the entire 10-week lockdown. Over this period we swabbed more than 650 employees and residents. I must say this was one challenging aspect of the lockdown.

The wait for each result brought about feelings of trepidation on one hand and reassurance on the other, reconfirming our efforts to keep a COVID-19-free environment.

Phase 2 certainly had its challenges. With a few asymptomatic staff members resulting positive, we had to promptly react and impose strict quarantine rules





for all our residents to ensure the strictest precautionary measures.

Our operational resilience was continuously tested. Yet we emerged stronger with each and every challenge faced, and continued to provide our residents with the best attention and care they truly deserved.

I am honoured to have led and been part and parcel of this project. The 10-week journey was an enriching life experience and I'm ever so ready for whatever challenges lie ahead in the preparation for the next 'normal'.



The Central Support Team, from left: Carl Caruana, Mario Debattista, Simonne Schembri, Janet Silvio, Natalie Briffa Farrugia, Denise Tierney, Sarah Aquilina, James Sciriha, Paul Sceberras and Lee Xuereb.

CENTRAL SUPPORT TEAM

What they had to say

"My role within this team started after a three-week lockdown. If I had to choose, I would go for the latter due to the direct contact with the residents – the real reason behind this experience."

Mario Debattista

"Technology was the enabling factor throughout this experience. It facilitated connection, communication and support between all the team members, those in lockdown and those on the outside."

Maria Xuereb

"We all have strengths and weaknesses but if we look at the ability in people, we are able to make each day count and achieve more together."

Denise Tierney

"Although very stressful, my best reward were those 30 seconds in bed before I slept, thinking we were doing more than was possible to protect our vulnerable residents, despite the exhaustion."

Paul Sceberras

"These 10 weeks brought everyone closer together, with team spirit at its best. The company's I Care values were practised."

Sarah Aquilina

"The whole three months were a whirlwind of decisions in new and uncharted territories; most of the time we could not compare with similar situations to forecast outcomes and this greatly increased the pressure we faced."

Lee Xuereb

"Even recalling it now brings tears to my eyes – only those who lived this journey can truly understand how hard it was for each and every one of us, but how incredibly rewarding and enriching it has been."

Janet Silvio

"Even though we were faced with different challenges almost every day, we knew together we would overcome anything by believing we could make it happen."

Carl Caruana

"It is in moments of need that you realise the greatness of people around you. This was the case when we started to work together as the Central Support Team."

Chris Gauci

‘ON THE WORD GO, EVERYONE WORKED LIKE CLOCKWORK’

PIO VASSALLO, CEO of the Vassallo Group, says the pandemic served to make people see and appreciate more the strength of the Group, its diversification and that all its subsidiaries depend on each other.



The weekend of Friday, March 13 to Monday, March 16 was the beginning of a 24/7 operation. I remember my sister, Natalie, calling me on Friday afternoon, telling me that CareMalta was going for a lockdown.

My first reaction was that this would be a shock to the system. My biggest worry was a fear of the unknown. I was aware that CareMalta's senior management team was making plans, preparing for the worst.

Obviously, the rest of the Group, together with the logistics department, had to be prepared to respond to something they didn't know anything about. This feeling of uncertainty was our first hurdle.

During that weekend, we had to coordinate the procurement of about 700 beds, mattresses, pillows, hand sanitisers and masks. The plan was to go for a lockdown on Monday, March 16 at midday, as the first cases of coronavirus transmission within the community had been recorded. Our foresight was spot on.

We had to come up with additional spaces within the homes where people could chill out and relax. Identifying such recreational spaces within homes for the elderly was not easy, more so when trying to make everything happen last minute.

This is when the strength of our group really came to light. People from different sections got busy coordinating all the parts. The procurement department did an amazing job, as did our IT team through the setting up of virtual rooms in all homes, as well as internet connection for employees and Playstations – all this in two days without

prior notice. On the word go, everyone worked like clockwork.

Hand sanitisers, medical equipment, masks, sheets, pillows and mattresses, among other items, were arriving at the Group's head office. These then had to be distributed to the homes for the 700 people taking part in the lockdown.

It was an experience!

I vividly remember Good Friday, which is when we discovered we had the first positive cases among our staff members. I was about to send an Easter message to all employees when my heart sank.

Even though I was struggling to feel positive, I wrote it and sent it. Easter brings hope.

And my Easter message was exactly what our people needed during this difficult time.

CaterEssence, another subsidiary within the Group, supported CareMalta wholeheartedly with food and other supplies, while ensuring that all items were sanitised before entry into homes.

The team at CaterEssence, who also experienced a lockdown, did an amazing job. These people had only a few hours' notice at their disposal before deciding to go for the initiative. In a matter of hours they were working in a completely new work environment, without any preparation whatsoever.

Here, the transformation of spaces, as well as the unique environment, brought out



The IT and Procurement teams



The CaterEssence team

the best in people. It also came as a surprise to see that a good number of employees fared extremely well outside their comfort zones.

Even though no one knew exactly what they were going in for, the lockdown was a strange but beautiful journey. Looking back, the whole experience was a balancing act between fear and trying to manage and calm down people.

It was also a first for the Group in terms of switching to virtual operations, thus organising and setting up online meetings. We would have eventually adapted to this new working mode, but the pandemic forced it to do this at a much faster rate.

“What these people did was incredible. I wish I could have experienced the lockdown with them”

However, this time has served to make us see and appreciate more the strength of our Group, its diversification and that all its subsidiaries depend on each other. Having supported CareMalta during the pandemic, the central processing unit in Qormi can now see how crucial it is to the system, as are CareMalta and CaterEssence, as well as the procurement and IT departments.

The lockdown project brings the story of Noah's Ark to my mind. Just like Noah and his family entering the ark, preparing for the storm, those who took part in the lockdown embarked on a mission, preparing for the worst. We knew a big storm was on its way, without being aware of how bad and long it would be.

What these people did was incredible. I wish I could have experienced the lockdown with them. They all said they felt so fulfilled. Leaving your family behind for three, eight or 10 weeks is something incredible. I admire their greatness and their willingness to be there for others.

My school's motto rings in my ears: 'Be a man for others.' They were truly people for others. What they did was extraordinary and a lesson for us all.



‘LOOKING BACK AT OUR JOURNEY TODAY FEELS SURREAL’

JANET SILVIO, director of HILA Homes, believes only those who work in the healthcare sector can truly understand how particular this phase has been.



This pandemic was like a huge wave which took us by surprise, having to learn very fast how to swim all the time against the current. But in the end, we got to the shore reaching our main goal – keeping everyone safe.

I still remember very clearly the day the decision for the voluntary lockdown in CareMalta's elderly facilities was taken. It was a huge step the company was taking, but we all knew that was the only way to keep our residents safe. I knew though that, at that point, HILA could not follow the same steps, at least not yet.

At Casa Apap Bologna we take care and support clients with both intellectual and physical disabilities, as well as mental health conditions. Closing our doors totally would not have worked – our responsibility at that point in time was not only to protect them from the virus which had reached our country but also to preserve their mental health.

The only way to do so was to keep our doors open yet kick off immediately with all the necessary measures which the situation required.

When the cases in the community started, we decided it was time to start the lockdown at Dar Bjorn, two weeks after CareMalta facilities had started theirs. This gave us the possibility to utilise their learning curve, as well as to adapt it to the needs and requirements of the home.

The greatest challenge here was having a small team, but we were blessed in that we found total collaboration from the members, with many either staying the whole eight weeks or alternating with a few others to get some rest. We were also grateful to have the full support of the ALS Foundation, which was all out, like us, to ensure that its clients were kept as safe as possible.

At Casa Apap Bologna the process had to be much slower due to the clients we support there. We started off by not sending them to day centres, having a no-visitors policy and not going out to public places. We then introduced a staff-to-floor-levels allocation to decrease contact, picked up and dropped off our staff from their homes, fumigated everything that accessed the home, carried out risk assessments of our staff roommates and also introduced the use of masks.

It was not an easy journey for our clients and it was challenging to totally reset their routines and ensure that they could still enjoy their days without being out in the community. We retained outings for them in the form of rides with our bus; we organised



many indoor activities; we engaged those most independent to do chores within the home itself, including office work and kitchen help, and also started yoga sessions to promote more stability and calmness. This was a huge team effort but it turned out to be successful.

Finally, when we saw that the cases in the community were increasing, not to leave any stones unturned, I decided to go for the lockdown.

While at Dar Bjorn we had our nursing manager join the lockdown for its first few days to settle the operations, for Casa Apap Bologna I decided to go in myself for a week. For me it was not only about feeling that it was my duty to do this but I also felt the need to be there, both for our clients and my team.

Once again here, as in Dar Bjorn, we had an amazing team. This experience threw me back to the beginnings of Casa Apap Bologna, where I used to sleep over when we organised 'live-ins' for our clients. My week, even though very busy and intense with a few hours of sleep, was one I will never forget – an enriching and unique experience which enforced even more my love for what we do, the drive to do more for our clients, and the respect towards my team.

It was a week of challenges, hard work, fun, laughter, discussions, arguments but, above all, a time of great satisfaction. I am not ashamed to say that, after exiting and driving towards

“The pandemic was like a huge wave which took us by surprise”



home, I could not hold back the tears, as I wished to stay longer and also because I had left with a full luggage of beautiful memories.

Now we have restarted. We are welcoming back our respite clients, who we missed dearly during the days the service could not properly operate. Our residential clients have slowly started going back out in the community and relatives can once again be with their dear ones.

How was this journey for me? There was no more line between work and personal life. I lived in constant apprehension that something could go wrong yet knowing that I would do anything not to allow it. I spent endless hours communicating with my team, as well as with our group's Central Support Team, since I also took over CareMalta's Facebook page during this period. A daily challenge, yet a constant reminder that we had done well on yet another day.

What did this experience leave me with? Much more than I can ever explain. I believe only those who work in the healthcare sector can truly understand how particular this phase in our lives was. More than ever, I have a renewed respect for all that the CareMalta Group stands for.

We are leaders in this field not because we have been working in it for the past 27 years but because we always led our operations and existence with the resident and client as our main focal point.

SAFE BUT ACTIVE

From sing-alongs to chair volleyball and yoga, dance, arts and crafts, bingo, as well as storytelling, there was always a special activity going on to keep the elderly in high spirits, especially since they couldn't see their loved ones.

On March 16, a team of employees moved into a number of elderly homes to ensure residents were cared for and safe throughout the coronavirus pandemic. Visits to care homes were also halted, to protect residents from the risk of COVID-19 infection.

"Moving into the homes at such short notice was a huge logistical challenge. Communal areas became staff dormitories overnight, while staff quickly had to adapt to new and wider roles. But despite these restrictions and limitations we still managed to run our daily active programme, encouraging even more residents to join in and be part of this experience," said Edel Borg Mizzi, a lead carer who was based at Casa Arkati together with her husband and their daughter.

"Now that we are more settled and things are slowly falling into place, we are involving the residents in everyday chores, such as preparing *ħobż biż-żejt* or cooking traditional dishes, or simply enjoying the sunny spring days in the garden, watering the plants or helping around with a spot of gardening.

"Some of the residents love playing bingo, keeping fit, painting, celebrating their birthdays with their friends or even playing music. A resident at Casa Arkati plays the piano every day to a small audience who thoroughly enjoys listening to his tunes. We also have two residents who sing Maltese folk songs. So even though this is not an easy time for the residents, these activities help keep most of them jolly and lively," Ms Borg Mizzi said.

Daily activities were ongoing in all the homes. A slideshow featuring life in Malta in the past filled residents at the Żejtun Home with nostalgia for younger, more carefree days when they were growing up. They all listened attentively, some recalling memories with smiles and laughter, others reminiscing "the good old days".

Whether it's cooking a special dish, preparing a bread pudding in the kitchen or having afternoon tea and croissants in the garden, CareMalta's active ageing programme offers residents the opportunity to enjoy the feeling that they are truly part of residential life, especially during the lockdown, when they had more time on their hands since they couldn't go out or receive visitors.

"Residents and their relatives are bubbly and loud, but humble, loving and sincere. On the other hand, the staff are equally hard-working and committed," said Simone Vella, manager at the Żejtun home for the elderly.

"Even though this is our work, we have a higher purpose – to love and serve the elderly in the best way we can. Now, more than ever, we are not only staff members but we can also become family to our residents," CareMalta CEO Natalie Briffa Farrugia said, urging employees to use their hearts and hands in order to make a difference in each other's lives during these particular times.





LOVE (AND LIFE) IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in countless changes to daily life. Six CareMalta employees, who joined the company's 10-week lockdown initiative with elderly residents, share their stories...

Pakistani player on Malta national cricket team hasn't seen his wife for months

For Michael Nazir, 41, who works at Casa San Paolo in Bugibba, his lockdown journey wasn't an easy time without his wife Chanda by his side.

Practically newly-weds, having tied the knot last December in Pakistan, the couple has not been able to be together at all after the wedding. He is in Malta, while his wife is in Pakistan.

Chanda was meant to fly to Malta on April 2 – having had both a visa and a work permit – to happily reunite with her husband, only to end up separated at the very last minute due to travel restrictions.

Michael has been working as a carer for the past four-and-a-half years.

"Having completed my studies in Pakistan, it was my dream to work with the elderly. When I left Pakistan, I got the job I've always wanted. I'm very happy here," he says.

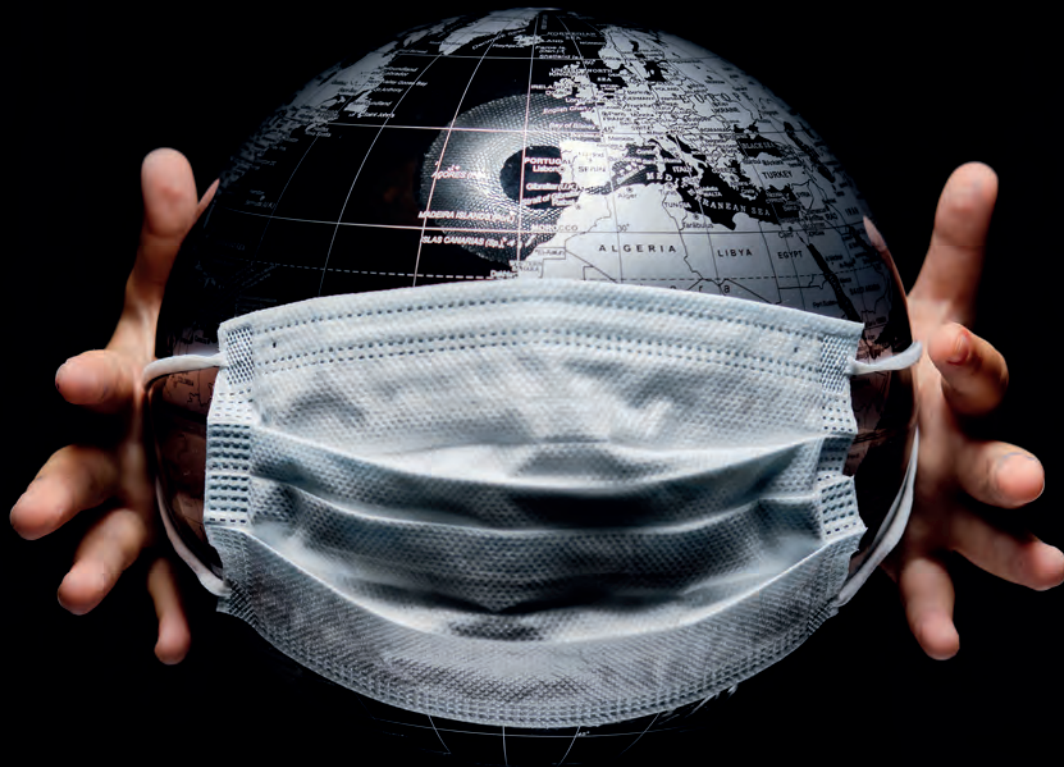
"Even though what I'm experiencing seems to be an impossible love story, everything is possible," says an optimistic Michael, who plays on Malta's national cricket team. On his off-duty days, during the long lockdown, he very often joined members of the team virtually to train and keep in touch with them.

"Of course, I miss my wife and I want her to be by my side. I will do anything to bring her to Malta. I wouldn't like to go back to Pakistan, as there are so many more opportunities here. Going back would be my last resort," says the cricket player from Karachi.

Michael and Chanda spoke to each other every day during the lockdown, either by phone or on Skype. At the moment she is living with her family in Faisalabad, which is almost two hours by air from Karachi.

"Bringing my wife to Malta is the most important thing for me right now. We miss each other and want to be together," Michael says.





Mother and son reunite with father after nine weeks

Suitcases in hand, Sanja Senderak and her son Lazar left Žejtun Home on May 16, nine weeks after having moved in, as part of a project by CareMalta to protect the elderly residents against the coronavirus.

A total of 841 employees have taken part in this voluntary initiative since it was launched by the company on March 16.

It was a special day for both mother and son, even though it was with mixed feelings that they departed their 'second home', amid the many cheers and goodbyes by Sanja's colleagues and the residents.

It was yet another emotional scene the minute the boy spotted his father Nemanja at a distance, eagerly awaiting them. The boy's face lit up as he immediately ran to his

father and flung himself into his arms, kissing and hugging him.

"After nine weeks of living at the workplace with my son, I decided it was time to go out. Even though our journey turned out to be much longer than I ever expected, I really enjoyed the experience," says the young mother, who is Serbian.

Sanja bid her colleagues one last farewell, after which, together with her son, she reunited with her husband in one long embrace – a touching moment for all three.

"I have gained a lot from spending so much time with both the residents and my co-workers. The fact that I had my son with me made the experience a lot better, knowing he was by my side and well."

Sanja has been working with CareMalta for the past two years as a carer and acting senior carer. She loves being with the residents, and, together with the team at the Žejtun Home, has helped them stay safe, active and well.

"When we first moved into the home, it was a very strange situation for us all, especially for my son, who is not used to spending so much time indoors. However, with time, we settled into a daily routine and started to feel more relaxed. I also got to know my work colleagues and my dear residents much better," she says.

"Our free time inside the elderly home was well organised thanks to our management, who supplied us with board games, television sets and Wi-Fi, together with excellent food and other services."

The most difficult moment for Sanja was certainly her first day of lockdown, "when I was aware that both my son and I were safe but that my husband was more at risk of contracting the virus".

She says: "Sometimes we don't realise how ordinary things, like dinner or watching movies with the family, can be priceless, until we get to a point where it is impossible to enjoy these moments together."



Father watches kids' virtual dance every night during lockdown

Boban Spasic, who works in the maintenance department at Roseville, joined the Vassallo Group in 2007. Before Roseville, he also worked at Villa Messina.

Married to Valentina, Boban has two children, Theodora, 5, and Andrei, 2, and lives in Bugibba.

"The very first time I joined the lockdown, it was hard for my daughter to understand that she would not see me for three weeks. Now, she seems to have realised what is going on. She doesn't cry for me anymore. It's very emotional to see both my children not wanting to let me go. Before joining the first phase of the lockdown, she said to me: 'Daddy, be a good man'," says Boban, whose eyes filled up with tears as he speaks.

Luckily, Boban's wife, who works in a hotel, had some time off, so she took care of the children all the time in their father's absence.

"I already miss my family in Serbia. Now I'm missing two families. But we have to be strong and make sacrifices. I'm not the only member of staff with a family and children.

"Every night, before I go to bed, I watch my children dance on the iPad. My daughter loves to sing and dance. I cannot wait to practise 'our fly dance' with her when the lockdown ends. It's 'our' dance, whereby I stand, waiting to catch her as she dances and jumps into my arms. She loves it."

Boban has a special connection with Theodora. "Since my wife mostly works on weekends, I am usually with the children at home. They are both full of energy and want to do a lot of things. It's good fun. They are both very excited to see me soon."

Husband joins wife in Malta right before lockdown started

His mother passes away but cannot attend her funeral

Lovees Sajan is an Indian nurse who works as a carer at the Żejtun Home. Coming from a middle-class family, she has been married to Vardhese for six years and has a four-year-old son Evan, who lives in India with her mother and brother.

Leaving their son with a heavy heart, Lovees's husband flew to Malta on March 5, having found a job here, to be with his wife. Unfortunately for both, their plans didn't materialise, due to the pandemic.

Lovees joined the company's lockdown initiative on March 16, so the couple ended up spending just a few days together.

"All alone in a new country, in our apartment in Marsascala, it was a devastating experience for my husband. With no friends, no one to talk to and not working, as his company closed down temporarily, it has been a difficult time for him," Lovees says.

"I was very worried, but I couldn't do much, especially when I was on duty. On my off days, I rang up my husband all the time to talk and feel close to him."

On April 14, Lovees's husband received a phone call from his father, breaking the terrible news that his mother had passed away suddenly after having experienced heart problems.

"He was shocked to hear this and took it very badly. To make things worse, he couldn't even travel to India to be with his family or attend the funeral.

"I am so relieved to be able to see him soon. We need to spend some time together."





Wife becomes family's breadwinner as husband loses job during pandemic

Sylvia Briffa, who works as a carer at Roseville, spent her entire lockdown away from her husband and three children – Bjorn, 29, Dylan, 25, and Maria, 23.

After the first three weeks, she thought she would be able to join her family and help them out with moving house from Žebbuġ to Qrendi.

Meanwhile, after all sectors of the economy were put on hold as a result of the pandemic, Sylvia's husband, Julian, a taxi driver, lost his job. So, in a bizarre, unexpected twist of events, Sylvia became the family's breadwinner.

"I wasn't sure what to do. I knew I had to take a decision. Finally, I decided to stay on," she says.

"I thought about my husband and children all the time during the lockdown, but through phone calls and Skype I could see that everything was running smoothly. They packed all our belongings in boxes, sorted out everything and organised the move to perfection."

Sylvia admits it wasn't an easy time.

"It was tough, especially at the beginning. We moved into the elderly home very quickly, so I wondered what would happen. But after a while, I settled down nicely. As much as I needed the money, I love working with the elderly and felt it was my duty to protect them against the virus. Looking back, I feel proud to have been part of the team at Roseville.

"We gave the residents what they needed and offered them the best service. It was truly a great experience. It's a bit like a camping trip with friends. We were on a mission as one family. I know that I will miss that time."

'My life changed for the better'

Having lived for 10 weeks with the elderly, Charmaine Izuakor says she would go through the whole experience again without a second thought.

Starting off as a carer at Casa San Paolo in 2016, Charmaine, 42, has worked her way up through the company to become a senior carer at the elderly home.

"I've always wanted to do this job," says the mother of three. "I think caring has to come from within. I always felt that working with the elderly was my calling, especially after I concluded my studies in the UK."

Charmaine admits that the lockdown journey was not easy. "Leaving my family behind was one of the hardest things I ever experienced, especially being separated from my kids, as we are always together."

However, knowing she had the full support of her husband, who volunteered to take care of their three children during the lockdown, on March 16 Charmaine joined the team at Casa San Paolo.

"After settling in, I had to learn how to live with others coming from different backgrounds and cultures. But I entered with an open mind, and this always helps. Also, being an I Care influencer helped me empathise more, step up and assume responsibility whenever the need arose."

"I've always wanted to do this job. Caring has to come from within"

During the pandemic, Charmaine's husband lost his job. "This came as a big shock, especially while having to deal with work and not being physically present at home.

Looking back, Charmaine feels she has gained a lot from her lockdown experience. "Our journey with the residents shows how strong we were to endure 10 weeks away from our home, family and comforts. It made me put myself in the residents' shoes."

In her free time, with each passing day, Charmaine got closer to the residents, either by just sitting with them, discussing life and learning a lesson or two, or even pampering them by doing their hair and nails.

What was the worst moment for Charmaine during the lockdown? "Watching the news and seeing an increase in the number of cases. It was also tough when our lockdown was extended by two weeks," she says. But the good moments far outweigh the bad ones. "It felt good to laugh together, even though we missed our loved ones. At times when we all felt shattered, we cheered each other on." Best moment ever? "When we received an e-mail saying that our lockdown would end two weeks prior to due date."



Charmaine Izuakor with a resident at Casa San Paolo

‘SO MANY PEOPLE DIED, WE ARE LUCKY’

The lengthy lockdown was particularly difficult for older people, who couldn't see their nearest and dearest. The residents and their families Skyped most days, but even so, it wasn't the same...

JOSETTE ZAMMIT, 76, of Gozo, resident at Casa Arkati

"I have been here for more than three years. I moved after I needed surgery for a slip disc I suffered, and then stayed on with my husband Carmelo, who passed away during the pandemic. We had been married for 45 years. The only thing I missed during the lockdown was not being able to go and visit him in hospital. But the management arranged for a special permit. I managed to see him two days before he passed away.

"I then had to spend two weeks in my room under quarantine. I attended my husband's funeral, wore a protective mask and, taking all the necessary precautions, everything went well. The staff here are looking after me hour by hour. They try to involve me in as many activities as possible.

"I'm knitting 160 small flowers in different colours to give as gifts to the residents on Mother's Day. This helps me stay busy. I say the rosary for residents every day in the reception area. It's a difficult time for me and this pandemic doesn't help.

"I try not to stay in my room all day. In fact, I'm trying to talk to the residents or the staff, as this keeps me going. My husband and I were always together, we were never separated and extremely close.

"It's useless worrying about the virus. We are taken care of here. All the necessary precautions have been taken and everybody feels safe. My aunt spent 17 years here, at Casa Arkati. That's why I chose it to be my home."



JOE & BETTY FORMOSA, 82 and 75, of Mosta, residents at Casa Arkati

"We decided to move to Casa Arkati three-and-a-half years ago. We sold our house and only kept the car.

"Nothing much has changed in our lives except for the virus. We are very happy and settled here at the home. Having had no children, we just miss going out by car, especially on the weekend. Prior to the coronavirus, we often used to drive all the way to Bugibba, stop for lunch or dinner somewhere or walk along the promenade.

"We also used to walk to the Mosta square every day, do some shopping and then stop for coffee or tea. We're quite active and make it a point to exercise every day.

"If this pandemic persists, we will have to start going out slowly and taking the necessary precautions, including wearing a protective mask. We need to be careful and stay safe, since we are vulnerable."





**DORIS SCHEMBRI, 87,
of Floriana, resident at Casa Marija**

"I have been a resident here for two years. With a situation like this, you have to be patient. The team here, together with Thea and Laetitia, organise a range of activities every day to keep us in high spirits and to occupy our time. I play bingo, watch films and enjoy the many parties organised. I also like to move around, as staying active is important.

"I have two girls. My older daughter, who lives in Canada and calls me every Sunday, will be visiting Malta next year. My other daughter has just moved to Qawra.

"I called my younger daughter yesterday, who said she will visit as soon as this pandemic is over. It all depends on how long it will take. I am very well taken care of. The activities take up most of our time.

"It hasn't been easy for us, especially since we all miss our families. Everybody must cooperate so that this pandemic doesn't take very long to pass. I appreciate everything, including the fact that the team has moved in with us, also leaving their families behind."



**DORIS BORG, 61,
of Mellieħa, resident at Casa Marija**

"I have a son who lives on his own and my husband lives at home. I miss them terribly. My son buys me stuff all the time. I have never seen them during the lockdown, but I talk to them every day on the phone.

"We never expected this virus. It has done a lot of harm everywhere. I like to watch Prof. Gauci, but I feel very tired all the time. I do, however, enjoy some of the activities we have here.

"My favourite hobby is recycling cards. I've managed to create about 300 of them. I also enjoy creating paper flowers. I think the pandemic will take long to pass. Hopefully not, but the most important thing is to stay safe."



**EILEEN GLASS, 79,
of Ta' Xbiex, resident at Zammit
Clapp**

"These past seven weeks have been really difficult.

"I always try to keep active, especially through mending. I also enjoy doing cross-words. In the evening my friend next door is kind enough to share her television set with me.

"This virus is a terrible thing that happened to us. Zammit Clapp is partly my home. I started here when I was young. Then I studied to become an SRN and carried on with my postgraduate studies.

"I came back because my mother suffered a heart attack and had to look after her. When she got better, I came back and started working again. So this home is my alpha and my omega."

FRANCIS AND ALFREDA GALEA, 83 AND 79, of Qormi and Valletta, resident couple at Casa San Paolo

"These past two months have been quite difficult, especially since we cannot see our son and daughter, Edward and Audrey, and our three grandchildren. Before the lockdown, we used to go on long morning walks together. This is a difficult time but we need to obey to remain safe.

"We usually walk to the square, then stop for a coffee. Now we cannot and there's nothing we can do about it. In the morning we sleep it off, watch TV, have breakfast in the room, then go down for lunch. When we come back to our room, we rest a little and then go down to the garden and stay by the pool.

"Our children sometimes visit us but remain outside. We see them from a distance. We miss seeing them and the grandchildren, but we call each other every day. I see this virus as an invisible enemy. Unlike the war, we cannot see it."

Mr Galea loves sports, "but I've hurt my shoulder and cannot do exercise at the moment. I used to train a lot when I was younger. I also enjoy the sea and walking. Once, I even walked to Mellieħa to meet a good friend of mine".

"Our message is to be patient and stay inside. After the storm comes the rainbow. I'm sure this will pass soon."



MARIA DOLORES O'NEILL, 88, of Sliema, resident at Zammit Clapp

"I moved to Zammit Clapp nine months ago. It was a shock not being able to see my family. But we don't need anything here. Life went on.

"I have four children, three boys and a girl, and six grandchildren. Although they call me every day, being able to see them physically is different. I wake up very early. Even at home I was the same. The routine here is quite busy. The carers take good care of us. They are also missing their families. Thanks to the staff, this time hasn't been too difficult.

"I always try to join some of the activities organised. The staff really do their best. I worry about my children, especially my eldest son, who is also vulnerable.

"My message is to obey the health authorities. I hope everyone will cooperate. We have made progress thanks to people obeying the health authorities. I hope to see my loved ones soon. It's different seeing my family on a tablet."



**MARY AXIAQ, 89,
of Sliema, resident at Casa San Paolo**

"This virus changed my life upside down. Every morning I used to go out on my scooter, go to Mass, after which I used to go for a ride on the promenade. I miss my morning outing, especially on a nice day. I also miss going out with my children. I have two sons and a daughter.

"Since my room overlooks the swimming pool, I cannot see my children if I go out on my balcony. But we speak on Skype every day. I also miss seeing my seven grandchildren.

"I think we will be the last to go out at Casa San Paolo. Many residents, including myself, need oxygen, so we are very vulnerable. We also spent a period of three weeks quarantined in our room.

"Very often, I go down to the garden and stay by the pool for some fresh air. I even go down to reception to check if I received any letters. I was also in charge of the chapel. But the chapel is now serving as a staff dormitory, so it's not being used for Mass.

"I used to go shopping, meeting people outside and talking to them. I miss doing all of these things. But, this time will pass, and hopefully end well. My message is to be patient. It's useless complaining. So many elderly people died around the world, we are lucky."

**CARMELO MUSCAT, 88,
of Dingli, resident at the Żejtun Home**

"I've lived in Żejtun for 65 years. I have five children, four boys and one girl. My wife has passed away. I've also lost one of my sons.

"The fact that you cannot go out is annoying, but the more you know this, the more you want to be outside. We are perfectly well here. We don't need anything.

"I'm in touch with my children every day, either by telephone or on Skype. I have 12 grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. One of my grandsons, who lives in Austria, played the French horn and sang for me on my birthday.

"I often went out on outings before the pandemic. My children also used to pick me up by car to go out with them. Once you have all the freedom, you tend to take this for granted. I walk in the garden about three times daily to keep active.

"I don't know what this virus is. It's quite scary.

"I've been a resident here for two years and I'm very happy. I spent 15 years living on my own after my wife passed away, doing all the daily house chores myself. I didn't even use my walking stick when I moved here.

"It seems that this virus doesn't want to let go. The pandemic has taken too long now. We are in God's hands."



**TONI GRIMA, 74,
of Kalkara, resident at the Żejtun Home**

"Since I lost my eyesight and I don't go out much, to a certain extent, not much has changed for me during the pandemic. However, my son and daughter used to take me out occasionally. The only difficult thing is not being able to physically feel my children's presence, not being able to touch them. Hearing their voices on the phone is not quite the same thing.

"But we speak to each other every day. I have five grandsons who, before the pandemic, used to come and visit me. I have never been able to see my youngest grandson, who is two. Unfortunately, I have only been able to touch him.

"Losing my sight was a big trauma, as I was extremely active. But perhaps it was God's will. Maybe he expects something of me. I love my radio and football. I used to play football with several Premier League teams, such as St George's, Little Rainbow, St Patrick's and Vittoriosa Stars.

"Radio and football mean the world to me.

"In life, there's always a problem. There were two world wars. Now there's this virus, which has killed many people without dropping bombs. But we are safer inside. It's better to miss our families than get infected. Better suffer now and enjoy freedom later. Hello to the people of Kalkara."



**MARYANNE MULA, 82,
of Gharghur, resident at Villa Messina**

"First of all, I thank the management for their excellent direction. We're OK here. It's true, we think of the virus all the time and our family, but we don't need anything. I miss our outings, which were organised regularly before the pandemic struck.

"My seven children always came first. I lost one of my sons, who passed away, and also one of my 11 grandchildren, who passed away at the age of 20.

"I sometimes get to see my children from my room, as it overlooks the street. I wave and blow them kisses. It's very emotional for us all. I'm from Gharghur but lived in Mosta.

"I watch a lot of television. I also join the activities held in the garden. We have a lovely garden here. Yesterday we were served ice cream and fresh fruit.

"This virus is scary. I constantly pray that we get rid of it. We have to be careful and take the necessary precautions.

"Life at the home is pretty normal. Not seeing my children is difficult, but we talk to each other every day on the phone and on Skype. Things run very smoothly here. We don't need anything.

"All we need to do is pray and obey the health authorities. I'm hopeful it will end very soon."



**MARY BEZZINA, 91,
of Cospicua, resident at Bormla Home**

"What I miss most during this pandemic is going out. I love my morning walks, especially to the garden opposite Bormla Home. It's a lovely place to relax and enjoy some quiet time. I also miss seeing my two children.

"But I don't need anything here. I'm very happy. I spend my days doing lots of crafts, some of which I give to my daughter, as I cannot keep everything in my room. She keeps many of them in a glass showcase in her living room at home.

"The staff here organise many activities for us. On Wednesdays I join the day care centre. On Thursdays I join all the activities organised by the home.

"I speak to my son and daughter every day, either by phone or on Skype with the help of the kind staff, who are always willing to see us happy. I also enjoy playing bingo. Before the pandemic struck, I used to spend weekends with my son and his family. I love being outdoors.

"I also love to cook. In fact, I sometimes cook my own food in my room. My favourite dish is fresh broad beans with garlic. It's delicious.

"I hope we will manage to overcome this difficult situation. Meanwhile, we need to obey the rules and stay safe."

**THERESA SCICLUNA, 81,
of Gudja, resident at Bormla Home**

"I joined Bormla Home 16 years ago with my dear parents. I come from a family of eight and since I was unmarried and lived at home I had a special bond with my parents.

"Here I could be with them all the time, as they couldn't bear to live without seeing me every day. Having passed away, I still miss their presence every day. We had a strong relationship.

"Every morning when I wake up, the first thing I think of is this virus and how I miss going out. I used to attend Mass at St Dominic's, St Margaret's and St Theresa's, so I miss going to church. Then I used to go for my daily walk.

"I talk to my brothers and sisters every day on the phone. After my daily exercise in the room, I go for lunch. At 4pm I join a group of residents for the rosary.

"I look forward to hearing Prof. Charmaine Gauci's health briefing every day."



ALFRED MUSCAT, 84, of Mellicha, resident at Mellicha Home

"COVID-19 scares me, especially when I think we could experience a second wave. This pandemic has changed my life. My wife Josephine passed away two weeks before March 16, when the home introduced its no-visitors and no-going-out policies. So, it was one blow after another.

"But we're doing fine, as we receive all the care we need. I miss my wife and miss seeing my two daughters in Malta, even though we Skype very often. My other two daughters live abroad.

"Not seeing your loved ones is a big sacrifice. I feel that we are fighting something we know nothing about, an abstract enemy.

"I start my day with the rosary and share a small prayer with friends and family on Facebook. I then spend a few hours painting by numbers and then take a walk.

"I am generally a happy and positive person, but at times the virus tends to put me in a bad mood. I miss human contact and talking to someone without having to worry about getting infected.

"How we are living now is far worse than how we lived during the war. The air raids came and passed, but we could still go out, go to church and attend school. Life went on. This virus has stopped everything. I also miss my daily visit to my wife's grave on my scooter. Then the short chat to a friend who sells newspapers. I hope all this will be over soon."



CARMELO MUSCAT, 80, of Mellicha, resident at Mellicha Home

"I feel completely cut off from the rest of the world. I cannot physically see my wife Salvina, whom I miss terribly, even though I talk to her every day on the phone. I also miss my children, my grandchildren and my 10 brothers and sisters.

"I'm the eldest even though I'm physically the smallest.

"I miss them all and, since I'm a very loving person, I send kisses to my wife and children all the time when we're speaking on the phone.

"I now sometimes sit on my balcony, look out and enjoy the breeze, especially if it's a nice day. I watch the news every day and read novels, both in Maltese and English. I love Mellicha and its beautiful views.

"Life goes on. I joke with my next-door neighbour, Alfred, all day long. Staying positive is important in life. We have to be patient. Everything will pass. We must obey what the health authorities tell us. I see a small ray of hope. I cannot wait to see my wife again. If I had a gun, I would shoot this virus."

INA CIAPPARA, 84, of Valletta, resident at Roseville

"To be honest, I'm not feeling depressed, even though we're going through difficult times. It's lovely here at Roseville. The staff go out of their way to make us feel comfortable and well and everybody is very kind.

"I miss seeing my only daughter. But I speak to her every day and feel I should stay away from her for the sake of her well-being, not only mine.

"I feel blessed to have led a happy life. After my husband passed away, I started experiencing balance problems and suffered frequent falls. Since I didn't want to be a constant worry for my daughter, I decided to move to Roseville five years ago.

"We must be appreciative and thankful for what we have. Gratitude is a virtue. The staff here are going beyond their call of duty to help us stay safe. We must look at what they're doing as an act of kindness.

"I keep myself busy at all times, especially with reading. I love a good book and enjoy spending time in the library. Together with the staff at Roseville we are taking all the necessary precautions to make the best out of the pandemic situation we are in.

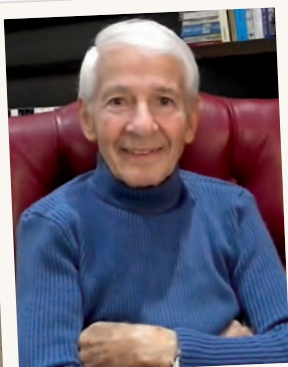
"We must be cautious, for everyone's sake. But I believe that every cloud has a silver lining. There's always light at the end of the tunnel. It all depends on how you look at life: reach for that ray of light or look at the darkest part of the tunnel."





CORONAVIRUS AND WORLD WAR II

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II, a time of crisis in many ways similar to the pandemic. Some of our residents were happy to share their memories... as well as sing a few lines from the *Tal-Victory Kitchen* song, to then feature on *Minestra u Għaġin, Fażola u Sardin*, a TV show by *Folla Nies*, FCN and Festivals Malta, on May 9.



Francis Galea, 83,
resident at Casa San Paolo

"My brother wore one shoe, I wore another"

Francis Galea, of Qormi, known as Ċikku, was still young during World War II.

"There are certain instances I will always remember, like the many times I zoomed off to the war shelter for protection from the frequent air raids. People sat-crammed on top of each other, keeping still until the attack was over. I remember the humidity in the shelter, water seeping in through the many cracks in the wall.

"I can still hear the village policeman's words: 'Do not pick up any strange-looking objects from the ground, as these can explode in your hands.'

"Because the roads were dirty and full of dust, there was a time when my body was covered in scabs. My mother used to tie me to the bed so I wouldn't scratch my wounds. To get water we needed to walk a long way. I remember my brother and I shared one pair of shoes. My brother wore one shoe, while I wore another."

"My dear father used to wake me up early to take me with him to Fort Manoel, where he worked. We used to leave home when it was still dark and return well after dusk. I will never forget these stories. I talk about the war very often, especially to young people. But they don't understand. They hardly believe you."

When the war started, Mary Axiag, of Sliema, was nine years old.

"We were a family of seven, with two of my siblings already married. I remember seeing planes diving down towards us. As we climbed down the war shelter, blasts from bombs crushed us against the walls. I will never forget a destroyer ship anchored in Balluta, right in front of the Carmelite church.

"There was barbed wire everywhere, so we couldn't go down to the bay to swim. There were times, especially when the war calmed down a little, when we used to manage to escape and go swimming just the same.

"I remember once seeing a land mine which miraculously ended up in a tree inside Villa Bonnici without exploding. I was so scared. I also remember the day when the Sliema police station was razed to the ground, as well as another time when a bomb fell on a group of people who were just entering a war shelter, killing a few.

"I missed a lot of school during the war. I spent more time at home. I remember the knick-knacks in our glass bookcase rattling during an attack."

"I remember seeing planes diving down towards us"



Mary Axiag, 89,
resident at Casa San Paolo



"I was around eight years old during the war. I have fond memories of my father, who was in the Royal Navy. I remember one particular day when I was hurt after falling in a field next to our house. Five bombs that had landed in this field formed craters. I fell into one and ended up on a tin of corned beef. In those times, people used to throw rubbish into these craters..

"They took me to the ARP (Air Raid Precautions), which served as a branch of the Malta Police and was based at the government school in Sliema. Here they bandaged my foot, and I was sent back home. On the way, amid falling bombs, I found my mother in a panic. A two-foot splinter had fallen through our skylight and landed right on our staircase.

"I remember the day my uncle Bob crashed with his plane; the next day, his wife gave birth to their baby"

"We went everywhere by bicycle, as there were no cars at the time and the roads were empty.

"My uncle got married during the war. One day, as we were watching an attack in the skies, we saw a plane nosedive after being hit. We all clapped, including my aunt, thinking it was a German plane. The next day, my father told us it was my uncle Bob's plane that had crashed in Qui-si-Sana. My aunt gave birth to their baby the next day. It was a sad day for all."



Carmela Tanti, 86,
resident at Casa Marija



Joseph Mary Bonavia, 95,
resident at Casa Arkati

Joseph Mary Bonavia, of Birkirkara, was 15 years old during the war. Joining the Air Force at the age of 18, he first underwent combat training, after which he formed part of a maintenance unit for airplanes that needed repair with Gasan. He was later posted to the air strip in Qrendi with the 185 Spitfire Squadron.

"Being part of the squadron, I recall standing on the tails of the planes, checking and testing that all was in order. Seeing all these planes taking off and not coming back was a horrible experience. Very few pilots were lucky to make it back to Malta during the invasion of Sicily.

"I was then posted to Ta' Qali and later to Hal Far. After my stint with the Royal Air Force, I joined the British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) and then IAL in 1948, an air traffic company, where I worked until 1986.

"My worst experience was as an air traffic controller – when the hijacked Egyptair boeing 737 landed in Malta. It was November 23, 1985. I was the first one the aircraft made contact with. I told them they couldn't land because the runway was blocked. But they landed as they were out of fuel. It was a horrible experience. Even though I saw nothing, I heard everything."

"Even though I saw nothing on the day the hijacked Egyptair boeing 737 landed in Malta, I heard everything"



Rosalia Bonnici, 95,
resident at the Mellicha home

"I was around 16 years old during the war. One day, as we were all crammed in the war shelter, the school building on top of us came crumbling down. The lights went out, and I searched for my younger sister in a panic as we could not see her.

"I also clearly remember the day when the Convoy arrived, even though it was severely bombarded by the German forces."

"I searched for my younger sister in a panic, as we could not see her"



Carmelo Zammit, 90,
resident at the Żejtun Home

"I was 10 years old during the war. I remember one particular day at school. The siren rang, meaning an air raid was imminent. That day our teacher sent us home.

"Passing by the church, we heard a huge explosion. We then saw bodies lying on the ground and injured people who could barely move, crying out for help. It was a tragic scene, one which will remain in my mind forever. I was so scared, I couldn't even breathe, as I frantically made my way home.

"My mother asked me what had happened. I tried to describe what I had just witnessed. I saw people crying and shouting out for help. Many people had been killed that day. It was one of the ugliest scenes I have ever experienced. In fact, I still mention it to my children to this day.

"What we are going through at the moment with COVID-19 is worse than the war, because we don't know where we stand in all of this.

"When my sister and I were hungry and asked my mother about food, she used to say: 'I am giving you a shilling, go to the Victory Kitchen. You are entitled to three portions of food.'

"I remember carrying a three-tiered saucepan and going to pick up our meal. Sometimes it was broth, or vegetable soup. On the way back home, we joked as we sang parts of the Victory Kitchen song."

"We saw injured people crying out for help. I frantically made my way home"

Rita Cassar, of Birkirkara, 90, remembers using the school shelter during the war.

"I remember my mother giving up her portion to feed us"

"Those were terrifying times. I think of the war very often but then the coronavirus comes to my mind and all my war memories quickly fade away.

Ms Cassar was 10 at the time. "My father, who worked at the Dockyard, had the number 45 on his arm. I can still clearly see the number on his uniform sleeve.

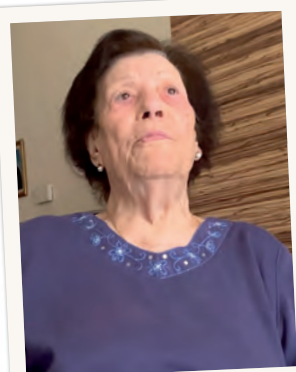
"As the planes approached and circled on top of us, a huge number of people, including myself, screamed and rushed to the school to get into the shelter as soon as possible for protection.

"For food we needed a ticket. Without it, we wouldn't receive our food supply. We suffered hunger but I remember our mother giving up her portion to feed us. We were the three youngest children."



Rita Cassar, 90,
resident at Casa San Paolo





Josephine Caruana, 95,
resident at the Mellicha home

“Many a time, I was almost hit by shrapnel as I approached the entrance to the war shelter”

“I was 19 years old during the war. I often think of those terrible days. They also bring back nice memories. It was a carefree time, when I was beautiful and had many admirers.

“I used to take care of my sister’s children, taking them one by one to the war shelter during air raids.

Many a time, I was almost hit by shrapnel on arriving at the entrance. They were scary times.

“I remember the Victory Kitchen song clearly. *Minestra u għaġin, fażola u sardin, tal-Victory Kitchen. U hokk ħakka ġobon, xi ġuvni joghġobhom, tal-Victory Kitchen.*”

“I was about nine years old during the war.

“We lived in Valletta. During an air raid we all rushed to the war shelter dug out into the bastions.

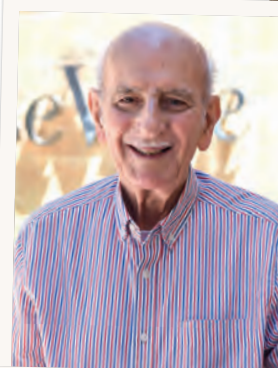
“Everybody prayed and said the rosary together and women who carried their gold items with them to the shelter had to be careful where they hid the stash, especially when candles melted down completely.

“The shelters were full of narrow passages. We used to pay to shelter in these little spaces. When an air raid was over, a siren rang out. After climbing up to the surface, all we saw were ruins.

“Looking at the planes flying high during an air raid was exciting. Since we lived in Valletta, from the bastions we had a good view of the pilots in their planes descending on Senglea, Vittoriosa and Cospicua to attack the battleships docked there. I still remember the *Ark Royal* being bombarded by the Germans. Half of Cospicua was razed to the ground that day.

“We later evacuated to Żebbuġ. It was safer there, unlike Valletta and the Three Cities where there were dockyards, as well as Ħal Far and Ta’ Qali, where the airports were.”

“From the bastions in Valletta, we had a good view of the planes descending on Senglea, Vittoriosa and Cospicua”



Joseph Schembri, 88,
resident at Roseville



Josephine Vella, 90,
resident at Villa Messina

“I was about 12 years old during the war. When I think of the war, memories come to mind, such as the Germans dropping bombs on the airport or on the destroyers.

“I remember the Victory Kitchen song: *Saqajhom hoxnin għax jieklu l-għaġin, tal-Victory Kitchen.*”

LIVING, LOVING AND LEARNING

Throughout the pandemic, Learning Works shifted its classes and courses online to continue providing vocational training. Four CareMalta employees, who volunteered to take part in the company's lockdown initiative, talk about the high level of support they received while studying and working at the same time.



Like many organisations all over the world, Learning Works did not see COVID-19 coming.

"So when schools closed down in March, we were faced with a Hobson's choice – do or die," said the company's CEO Charlo Bonnici.

"It was a question of either closing down the operation or switching to online. We went for the latter. After trying out a number of platforms, we chose Zoom, which works well for live online sessions. Today we run several classes every day, six days a week," he explains.

Feedback from a number of students and lecturers who took part in an online survey conducted by Learning Works subsequently helped the company tweak the service it was providing.

"I'm happy to say that everyone has now fully embraced this new way of life."

Although Learning Works officially turned one in February 2020, it has been operating within the education sector for the past 10 years. Previously known as the CareMalta Academy, courses provided focused mainly on healthcare.

The company has come a long way since then, having extended its courses to more sectors, namely health and social care, management, hospitality, languages and sport.

"We have an excellent relationship with CareMalta, our biggest clients, which we intend to keep growing and developing in the years to come."

Fredirose Bulaclac, 43

**CARE ASSISTANT AT CASA
MARIJA**

Level 1 Maltese Language Course

Fredirose Bulaclac, from the Philippines, has been in Malta for more than four years.

Studying and working at the same time was a big challenge for her, but with a lot of support from both Learning Works and CareMalta, she could keep up with her daily schedule and set up her online class relatively easily.

"My schedule was flexible, giving me the opportunity to manage my time well, either by joining an online lesson or studying on my own when I was off duty.

"The courses are informative and useful, ranging from health-care, food and beverage, management and a lot more. Personally, my course has helped me cope better at the workplace, since I am able to communicate better with the residents. I still have a lot to learn, which encourages me to join the next course level in the coming months.

"Joining the lockdown experience was also a great opportunity and one memorable journey."





Crystal Degabriele, 21
FACILITY ADMINISTRATIVE
ASSISTANT AT BORMLA HOME
Level 5 Leadership and
Management

Crystal Degabriele, who has been working at Bormla Home for the past three years, is from Cospicua but lives in Valletta. Having been studying leadership and management since 2019, she hopes to complete the course in a year.

She started off with the Level 4 Course in Leadership and Management and recently decided to take her studying a notch further by going for Level 5.

"Learning Works offers a number of interesting courses, which serve to improve your career. My course has helped me understand better certain management styles and improve my decision-making abilities and leadership skills.

"Living at Bormla home for three weeks and studying at the same time was a huge challenge, as in addition to my role I was also doing front office duties. It was not easy but I'm happy to have managed to do all this.

"After much thought and discussion with my family, I decided to join the lockdown, as I believed that I could contribute to the well-being of our residents and also saw the experience as an opportunity that could teach me more about the operations of an elderly home.

"A memory I will surely never forget is that, as a team we laughed together, cried together and got to know each other better. We worked hand in hand, like clockwork, and this contributed to the lockdown's success."

Adriana Vlaad, 51
CARE ADMINISTRATOR,
ZAMMIT CLAPP
Level 5 Leadership and
Management

Adriana Vlaad, from Romania, joined CareMalta nine years ago. During the first 10 weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic she decided to join the lockdown to safeguard the life of the elderly residents at Zammit Clapp.

"This wasn't an easy decision, as I had to leave my family at home, including my mother who is 81 years old, who lives with me. But I knew she would be safe and in good hands."

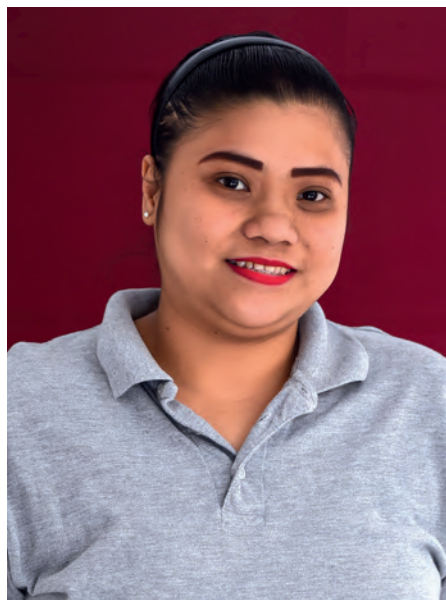
Having started the lockdown as a senior care assistant, Adriana continued in her role as care administrator, after which she replaced a colleague who had to return home to take care of her young child as lead care assistant.

"The experience was tough but I learnt a lot from it. I was practically on call all the time. Many changes were made, rules were implemented according to the need and people kept asking for information, so it wasn't easy for any of us. I had to reassure them (residents, relatives and staff) that everything would be OK till the end only if we worked as one team and followed the rules."

While on duty, Adriana had assignments for two modules of her course to work on. "Finding the time was a problem. Very often, the minute I started carrying out my research, a problem cropped up and I was called to help solve it. At one point, I was going to give up and drop the course, but then an inside voice told me I was not a quitter.

"So I plucked up the courage to continue studying, despite work. The management team at Learning Works was very understanding and supportive. I was given an extension, so in the end I managed to finish my assignments while also working my shifts."

This is not Adriana's first course with Learning Works. In 2018, she obtained the Level 4 Award in Leadership and Management with Distinction.



Ruby Anne Manzano De Vera, 32
CLEANER, CASA SAN PAOLO
Level 3 Course in Healthcare

Ruby Anne Manzano De Vera, from the Philippines, has been in Malta for almost two years.

"When we were informed about the lockdown with the residents, I didn't think twice. I accepted immediately. At first it wasn't easy, since we were working and sleeping in one place. But as the days went by, I realised that the experience became a daily routine, whereby I couldn't even remember what day it was."

Ruby Anne loved the fact that she was living under one roof with her colleagues.

"It was a beautiful experience. We got to know each other better, made new friendships and enjoyed good teamwork. It's a memorable journey."

When online coursework started, Ruby Anne found it extremely difficult to work and study at the same time. She didn't even take her portfolio and notes with her. Her schedule was arranged and, with the help of the management team, her portfolio was printed and a colleague lent her a laptop.

"I received a lot of support from everyone and for this I'm really grateful. So, working and studying at the same time is not easy, but if there are people who support you and encourage you to study, you can move on to the next step in your career."

CHAIRMAN RECOGNISES TEAMS WITH SPECIAL COVID-19 MEMENTO ON VASSALLO GROUP'S ANNIVERSARY DAY

Two elderly homes also celebrate their fifth and 10th birthdays

On June 4, group chairman Nazzareno Vassallo visited CareMalta and HILA homes, as well as CaterEssence and Learning Works, where he distributed COVID-19 commemorative plaques in recognition of the hard work and determination shown by all the teams involved in the 10-week lockdown during the pandemic.

June 4 is a significant day, as it marks the anniversary of the group, which started to operate just after the end of World War II in 1946.

Mr Vassallo, together with the group's management team, started their day at the group's head office, where the first plaque was presented to CareMalta's Central Support Team, headed by director James Sciriha, who worked incessantly to ensure that the lockdown ran smoothly in all homes.

Mr Sciriha thanked all the members on his team for their continuous support

throughout the pandemic. "Without teamwork, this initiative would not have materialised," he said.

At Casa Arkati, CareMalta's first private home, having opened its doors in 1993, Mr Vassallo praised nursing manager Noel Borg, who led the team during the lockdown, saying: "On this day, rather than you coming to us to pick up your Shine Award, we are coming to you with this memento to say thank you for your dedication towards keeping the elderly safe during the pandemic. CareMalta has truly been a star player in this journey. This is also an important day for the group as, from tomorrow, we will all start working towards making our 75th anniversary next year a memorable one."

The chairman was accompanied by his daughter, Natalie Briffa Farrugia, CEO of CareMalta, and his son Pio Vassallo, the group's CEO.

CaterEssence, Vassallo Group's catering arm, also played a significant role during the pandemic. A group of chefs who volunteered to work and live away from their families to ensure supply continuity and reduce the chance of exposure to the coronavirus, prepared around 5,000 meals a day during the lockdown.

It was a double celebration for Learning Works, the group's training arm, which, throughout the pandemic carried on with courses and classes online. Headed by CEO Charlo Bonnici, it also marked its official first anniversary on June 4.

The day also marked the fifth and 10th anniversaries of Casa San Paolo and Roseville respectively. Mr Vassallo thanked Robert Grech and Mario Debattista, who led the teams at Casa San Paolo, and Roslynn Vella at Roseville, praising them and their staff for their excellent care and perseverance during



CASA ARKATI



ZAMMIT CLAPP



ŽEJTUN HOME



ŽEJTUN HOME



MELLIEHA HOME



HILA



HILA



CASA SAN PAOLO



CASA SAN PAOLO



ROSEVILLE



CASA MARIJA



CASA MARIJA



VILLA MESSINA

this difficult and extraordinary time. In a short address, Mr Grech thanked everyone for their relentless mission to keep the residents safe and sound.

“It was a hard time for all but we worked together as one team with one common aim – that of protecting our residents.”

Anniversary celebrations at Roseville included a special lunch for residents, followed by a blessing by Fr Noel Vassallo outside the facility, a blood donation session for staff, as well as the cutting of an anniversary cake and entertainment by violinist and resident George Spiteri.

Ms Vella said: “I feel humbled to receive this recognition on behalf of all the team. We have endured a hard journey, but I am grateful that I am leading a team made up of people with diverse skills and knowledge, who together made all the difference, and we could reach a safe harbour.”



ŽEJTUN HOME



BORMLA HOME



BORMLA HOME



CATERESSENCE



LEARNING WORKS

CELEBRATING SPECIAL

With its ups and downs, life for 10 weeks inside elderly homes was a time full of memories to cherish. These remarkable pictures say it all.



MOMENTS TOGETHER







#staysafe

We are in this together



COMPASSION • ENGAGEMENT • PROFESSIONALISM

CareMalta

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