This year’s Empty Plate Campaign will be a special one dedicated in memory of our late Executive Director, Dr. Thelma Bland Watson. On November 10th, we will honor Thelma, who created and expanded the campaign which includes the “Empty Plate Luncheon.” Every year she looked forward to it as friends and colleagues from every sector, public and private, gathered in support of Senior Connections, and its goal of empowering older adults to live with dignity and choice. And her leadership certainly transformed perspectives about aging.

An annual recognition — The Phoebe and Frank Hall Humanitarian Award — was created to call attention to those who positively impacted the welfare of older adults through their service and ongoing efforts. This year’s honorees are two outstanding individuals — Marge Boynton and Paul Izzo. Both recognize the importance of assuring well-being as we grow older and continued support to those around them. Marge Boynton is the Support and Advocacy Services Director for Senior Connections and Paul Izzo, P.C. is Director with Thompson McMullan.

We will celebrate the remarkable career of Dr. Watson. Our speakers, considered her close confidants, are: Bill Harrison, President of Diversity Richmond, Dr. E. Ayn Welleford, Gerontologist for Community Voice, Virginia Department of Gerontology, Virginia Commonwealth University, and Managing Director—Longevity Project, and Bob Blanchato, National Coordinator of the Elder Justice Coalition.

Thelma knew the importance of collaboration and how the involvement of other community partners could transform both perspectives and environments for older Virginians. Thank you to our sponsors and other supporters for making this celebration possible.

2021 Phoebe and Frank Hall Humanitarian Award

Senior Connections is pleased to recognize contributions made to benefit the well-being of older adults, caregivers, and families. The Phoebe and Frank Hall Humanitarian Award was created to acknowledge and call attention to those whose work has impacted older adults and caregivers. Phoebe Hall was a distinguished attorney and Rector of Virginia Commonwealth University, and Delegate Franklin Hall was a longtime leader of the Virginia House of Delegates. The late couple who led by example understood the importance of developing policies to support older adults. They worked to raise awareness on issues specific to adults 60 and older and emphasized the importance of recognizing the diversity of the aging population. Phoebe Hall’s wish was for this award to honor individuals who are not often recognized for the contributions they make towards improving the lives of older adults. Senior Connections is honored to present this award to two individuals who are tireless advocates working to improve the well-being of older adults in our community.

Honoree Marge Boynton, Support and Advocacy Services Director for Senior Connections has worked at Senior Connections, for more than 31 years. Holding a number of leadership positions with the Agency prior to this one, Marge oversees the Agency’s Senior Employment, Long-Term Care Ombudsman, Volunteer Money Management, VICAP, Home Care, and Volunteer programs. In addition, she leads the development of the annual Area Plan for Aging Services and as well as the Strategic Plan.

Before joining Senior Connections, Marge worked as a planner for an area agency on aging in West Virginia, a program specialist at the state unit on aging in West Virginia, and a social worker at a facility for individuals with intellectual disabilities in Richmond, Texas. She has her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from The College of William and Mary and a master’s degree in social work from the University of Georgia.

Honoree Paul Izzo is an attorney working in the field of elder law at Thompson McMullan. Attorney Izzo helps older adults and their caregivers navigate complex and vital issues including estate planning and administration, guardianships and conservatorships for incapacitated adults, public benefits planning, and nursing home residents’ rights. He traces his interest in working in elder law back to the relationship he had with his grandparents and remembers the gut-wrenching decisions for his paternal See Awards, p. B-3
Senior Connections 18th Annual Empty Plate Campaign Honoring Dr. Thelma Watson

The 18th Annual Empty Plate Campaign is a truly special event this year because we will honor Dr. Thelma B. Watson, who served as the Executive Director of Senior Connections for nearly two decades. Who was she and what did she contribute to the betterment of our region? Described as a visionary, an inspirational and compassionate leader, and above all, a fierce advocate for older adults and passionate that they live with dignity and choice. Dr. Watson always made decisions with the agency’s mission at the forefront of her mind. Her long career and portfolio included sitting after professional expertise in gerontology, public policy, nonprofit management, state agency leadership, public speaking, collaboration with the region’s pacemakers on issues of community service, inclusion and advancing resources for aging well. Her numerous awards in inclusion and advancing resources for work matters and that we are all making a difference to improve lives and communities. Her stories, full of humor, humility, and kindness, are a call to keep going, have a broader perspective, look at the long game, and be kind.

Join us on November 10th at 11:30 a.m. for the 18th Annual Virtual Empty Plate Campaign Celebration honoring her. We are fortunate to have three close colleagues who will illuminate the event with their messages.

- Dr. Ayn Welleford, Associate Professor and Gerontologist for Community Voice, Virginia Commonwealth University and Co-lead of the Longevity Project for a Greater Richmond
- Bill Harrison, President and Executive Director of Diversity Richmond
- Bob Blancato, President of Matz, Blancato and Associates

Dr. Welleford, a well-known expert in the field of gerontology, has taught extensively in the areas of Lifespan Development, and Developmental Gerontology, Geropsychology, as well as Ethical Decision Making and Human Values. As Associate Professor and Gerontologist for Community Voice, she works to make our community a great place for all people to GROW older by bridging the classroom and community. Dr. Welleford also serves as co-leader of the Greater Richmond Age Wave coalition with Senior Connections. In addition, Dr. Welleford and Dr. Watson worked closely to establish the Longevity Project for greater Richmond. She is known for saying, “Let’s do something that does something” and she and Dr. Watson certainly did “something” with the creation of the Longevity Project.

Bill Harris has served as the President and Executive Director of Diversity Richmond since 2012. Bill Harrison’s long tenure in the nonprofit area precedes his role as Diversity Richmond’s executive director. He worked in development and community resources with the Fan Free Clinic during the height of the HIV epidemic, and he served as the first public information officer with the Virginia Department of Health’s Bureau of STD/AIDS. In addition, for 17 years, Bill Harrison served as the Government and Public Affairs Director with the Greater Richmond Chapter of the American Red Cross. Bill recently shared a favorite memory of Thelma – both volunteered with the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities (VCIC). During that time, he reached out to Thelma to see if she Virginia Caregiver Coalition

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See Empty Plate, p. B-3
grandmother’s long-term care. After working in private practice, Paul was selected for an internship in long-term care administration at Westminster-Canterbury, a retirement community in Richmond. Paul learned the intricate operations of continuing care retirement facilities, as well as the issues residents face. In 1985, he sat for the licensure exam for nursing home administrators; one that he maintained for over three decades.

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knew someone who could help with an older adult in need. Thelma’s response was, “We will take care of it. It is what we do.” Bill shared that this was the essence of Thelma, taking care of older adults without hesitation.

Bob Blancato is President of Matz, Blancato and Associates, a Washington D.C. firm integrating strategic consulting, government relations and advocacy services, and association and coalition management. Matz, Blancato and Associates have particular expertise in issues such as federal aging programs, healthcare policy, and senior nutrition. Bob Blancato serves as the National Coordinator of the bipartisan 3000-member Elder Justice Coalition, the Executive Director of the National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Programs, the National Coordinator of the Defeat Malnutrition Today coalition. Before serving as President for Matz, Blancato and Associates, Blancato served as a staffer in Congress. Bob Blancato was appointed by the Secretary of Health and Human Services, Secretary Azar, to a four-year term on the National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services. Bob Blancato, an award-winning advocate, holds a B.A. from Georgetown.

In remembering Dr. Watson, Bob shared the following sentiment, “Thelma was unique in many ways but for me, one of the most valuable was the way she would offer advice, counsel, and wisdom on issues related to older adults. My work involves national legislation and policy but if ever a perspective was needed on how a program or a service work for older adults in Virginia, you reached out to Thelma as I did countless times. You could never say no to Thelma because you never had to. Truly a special person in so many ways.”
November is National Family Caregivers Month

A Caregiver’s Mission of Sharing the Benefits of a Team Approach

In the November 2019 issue of this publication, we highlighted the experience and thoughts of caregiver Trina Flannery, who had been providing care to her mother in the home she shares with her husband. Trina’s role as primary caregiver was to optimize the health and ensure the highest quality of life possible for her mother. She developed her expertise and knowledge by attending/facilitating support groups, online research, subscribing to newsletters on caregiving, networking within the Chesterfield Council on Aging, utilizing the services of formal healthcare systems and being persistent in the detective work that this role requires.

Trina hopes by candidly sharing again with me for this article that her “hard lessons learned” may be of benefit to other caregivers currently in the trenches. She knows firsthand the challenges and triumphs associated with being an adult child in the role of primary caregiver to a parent. She has also come to know more about that experience when the caregiving journey comes to an end as her mother transitioned the summer of this year.

So, Trina once again finds herself in uncharted territory. She is learning what it means to be an executor of a will. She is updating her resume to reflect the transferable skills she honed during her caregiving experience. She is navigating the dynamic that comes from being one of five siblings in a large family who are all grieving the loss of their beloved matriarch. She is re-calibrating the relationship with her husband in a home now devoid not only of her mom, but also of caregivers, in-home Dr and nurses visits as well as all the medical equipment required to provide ‘full care’ for her mother 24/7.

Trina also openly shared the cascades of unfamiliar emotions that “don’t feel like grief. It feels like regret stemming from any time I was ‘less than’ as an exhausted, stressed-out caregiver or daughter. It feels like trauma that comes from the final act of service for family caregivers, holding the hand of a loved one who is actively dying. And it feels like missing the mom of my youth”. When I would follow-up with Trina during this time she would very honestly respond to questions with “I am feeling this way today, but the feelings associated with grief are intense and change frequently so my answer may vary if you ask me again later,” which I think is a pretty good response.

As we sat together discussing all that has been learned through this evolving 30+ year journey as a caregiver, it was clear Trina has a passion to assist other family caregivers by her statement that she “can’t seem to stop helping, even if it’s not requested.” Caregivers often discover that crucial information is obtained through encountering the right person at the right time. But Trina also found it vitally important to be proactive in seeking out answers, asking for and accepting help and building a team to support you and the person you’re caring for. She is always quick to express gratitude to God, her husband, siblings, a niece who’s an RN and the entire team that was involved over the years. Trina said without the mom of my youth”. When I would follow-up with Trina during this time she would very honestly respond to questions with “I am feeling this way today, but the feelings associated with grief are intense and change frequently so my answer may vary if you ask me again later,” which I think is a pretty good response.

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In addition to caregiving and the coordinating of the team, Trina also navigated a role only she could fill in her home, that of wife. Her husband, Dennis, frequently said his job was to “watch out for his wife as she cared for her mother.” Dennis loved and was supportive of his mother-in-law living and receiving care in the house they all called home. He did however make it clear that if he thought caregiving on this level was jeopardizing his wife’s health, he had the right to effect change. Dennis was vigilant in gauging the balance so his wife would not get lost to the role of caregiver. It takes a special kind of relationship to both voice and hear this level of loving honesty. As fate would have it, in the last year of her mother’s life, the parameters Trina’s husband set would be tested. The year 2020 brought with it the additional stressor of the COVID-19 pandemic. Routines that had become well defined had to be reconsidered as health and safety became the primary goal. There were long periods of no help in the house due to employees and family members having to quarantine, and medical help as well as supplies were more challenging to come by. Then 2021 rolled in and along with her mother’s declining health and increasing needs came a situation that Trina had dreaded ever having to confront. Although her mother had done extremely well handling her finances as a young widow with 5 children, she also was a “tough bird” who beat the odds medically, was 97 years old and could foreseeably outlive her money. This would mean that the two critical components of her carefully established team and plan of care would be at risk; the ability to pay for caregivers and private insurance that had enabled excellent medical and physical care to support her mother.

Trina began actively pursuing all available benefits she had been keeping on the back burner, hoping they would never come into play. And diving into her well established network for greatly needed assistance to navigate the tedious and time-consuming application process for those benefits. She applied for and was granted her mother’s Veteran’s Affairs Aid and Dependence benefits. In addition, she had begun the process to explore Medicaid waivers but her mother passed prior to completing the application.

Trina cautioned that for this article, she focused on the more difficult aspects of caregiving in hope’s others could take away tangible ‘where the rubber meets the road’ tools and skills to empower their own caregiving experience. She said it would take a separate meeting to fully discuss all the happy, positive, funny, uplifting life experiences and the precious extra time with her mom that caregiving afforded her.

I’m grateful to Trina for sharing her feelings so honestly and openly. She has learned so much in her care journey and is generous in sharing her wealth of information. If you, or someone you know would benefit from a consultation about caregiving, please call Senior Connections Caregiver Support at 804-343-3000.