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Since January, Macomb Township's Leah Yacoub has been part of the national movement among balloon artists called Adopt A Grandparent. The movement is aimed to spread cheer to residents living in facilities away from their family.

Photo provided by Leah Yacoub

Adopt a Grandparent movement catches on in Macomb County

By: Alex Szwarc (/reporterbio/alex-szwarc) | **C&G Newspapers | Published February 8, 2021**

MACOMB COUNTY — For those in Michigan living in senior care facilities, the pandemic has often meant isolation from family.

Since January, Leah Yacoub has been part of the national movement among balloon artists called Adopt A Grandparent. In the span of a couple weeks, over 150 senior care residents have been adopted locally.

The Macomb Township resident owns Balloon Hype, which creates balloon decor completely customized to occasions and themes.

For \$10, folks can purchase a balloon buddy, which will be delivered to an area facility. Yacoub describes a balloon buddy as a bright, smiley-face yellow balloon holding a red heart. Balloons are about 18 inches in height.

“Just the right size for hugging and holding,” she said. “This has been therapeutic for the residents and staff. When I walk into a lobby with an arm-full of smiling buddies, the energy is uplifting and the staff gets excited at the possibility of giving the residents a surprise balloon buddy.”

The movement is aimed to spread cheer to residents living in facilities away from their family.

Michigan.gov states that for visitation to residential care facilities during the pandemic, facilities must prohibit visitors from entering their facilities.

“When I first heard about the national movement, I knew I had to be a part of it,” Yacoub said. “When all the residents at this facility are adopted, we will move on to the next Macomb County facility to continue the mission of spreading joy and hope.”



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Several senior living facilities in Macomb County have benefitted from the movement, where balloon buddies are sent to a community. Pictured is a resident from Pine Ridge of Hayes in Sterling Heights. Photo provided by Leah Yacoub

Yacoub, 46, opened Balloon Hype shortly after the pandemic began. She is part of a national networking group for balloon artists.

Balloons are not to be designated for a specific recipient; they are delivered in a bulk order to an assisted living community and distributed among residents by the staff.

Sheila Coté, director of the Macomb County Office of Senior Services, called the balloon project a wonderful one.

"It's bringing the outside in to our seniors and letting them know there are people thinking about them," she said. "Any program like that is beneficial to helping our seniors."

When the pandemic began, the county office began making calls to its participants to check in. Then it decided to call individuals regularly to chat.

"We have seniors that will talk for a half hour and share their history and life experiences," she said. "They get a lot of gratification out of those phone calls. They're in that stage of life where sharing their story is very important to them."

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Coté added that social isolation increases mortality risk on the same level as smoking, obesity and lack of exercise.

"This gives the community an opportunity to contribute," she said. "I think it's a win-win situation."

Yacoub said that amid social distancing, loneliness and depression are at an all-time high. When that is compounded with isolation from family, "it can be devastating."

For some residents, she said they haven't received a hug or seen their family for 10 months.

Balloon Hype is on its fifth senior living facility of residents to adopt. Each facility received around 30 balloons.

"People from all over the county and some even out of state have anonymously adopted," she said.

Facilities that received balloon buddies so far are Clinton Creek Assisted Living Memory Care in Clinton Township, Pine Ridge of Hayes in Sterling Heights, Pine Ridge Plumbrook in Sterling Heights, Sterling Heights Comfort Care, and Church of Christ Care Center in Clinton Township.

Ann Marie Broquet, Pine Ridge of Hayes director, said she views the balloons as a way to bring joy to the residents, knowing the community thought of and supported them.

“When we delivered them, we told them we had a gift for them and it was sheer enjoyment,” she said. “I had one resident say, ‘How did you know that I loved balloons?’”

Broquet said balloons help residents because they can look at it throughout the day.

“The joy of that smiling face and heart brings a smile to their face, as well,” she said.

Despite pandemic shutdowns, Yacoub said folks are still trying to make life moments special.

“Even though events look different for now, we can be creative and offer different designs,” she said.

To purchase a balloon buddy, visit balloonhype.com/adopt-a-grandparent. Yacoub said if businesses would like to sponsor a facility, that can be arranged.

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