



CONNECTIONS

A short phone call can make a big difference

By HOPE MUÑOZ
For the Minnesota Star Tribune

On any given weekday afternoon, usually Tuesdays, Joyce Harris receives a phone call at her home in Minneapolis. At the other end of the line sits Mary Maas in St. Paul. Like old friends, they discuss a range of topics from weather to politics to restaurant recommendations, but there's one peculiarity: They have never met in person.

The calls began in 2024 after Harris retired from a career in insurance, retail and with the city of Minneapolis. Her life is starkly different from when she was in the workforce. At 81, she lives alone and enjoys the freedom that comes

with fewer obligations. Every so often, she chats with the bellman or mailman and spends time with her boyfriend, a semi-retired accountant.

Before retirement, Harris was surrounded by people. She joked that when she worked at Dayton-Hudson Corp., the forerunner to Target, people would come in and tell her their life stories. "You didn't have to ask anything," she said. "They just start talking and talking and talking."

After retirement, she realized that many of her friends were people she had worked with and were still in the professional world. She missed the interaction, the routine conversations that were part of her

daily life for decades.

"You don't have that community anymore," Harris said.

In 2024, Harris signed up for a program called Phone Companions, hosted by the Minnesota-based nonprofit Friends & Co. The organization pairs volunteer callers with older adults.

Harris joked that she was "really just looking for a guy to talk to." Instead, she was matched with a female volunteer, Maas, during the run-up to the presidential election. The two bonded over their aligned political views and shared sense of humor.

"We hit it off. We just really connected," said the 86-year-old Maas. "Like-minded in many areas, it

was so easy to talk to Joyce, and we would get angry together about what's going on in the country or the city."

'Flowers before bread'

Before joining Friends & Co, Maas worked at Amicus Reconnect, a re-entry program for people with criminal backgrounds to find housing, jobs and other resources. After she retired about four years ago, Friends & Co drew her in because of its saying, "flowers before bread." She liked the idea of focusing on providing services other than just physical necessities.

Maas first connected with a caller for over a year and enjoyed it. After his death, she matched with Harris.

In addition to Phone Companions, Friends & Co has other programs to combat social isolation, such as Coffee Talk, which hosts 20-minute, one-on-one, drop-in phone calls, as well as in-person programs for home visits and gatherings. Loneliness and isolation affect about a quarter of the older adult population, increasing their risk for developing physical and mental health conditions. Social connection reduces that risk.

Friends & Co, formerly known as Little Brothers – Friends of the Elderly Twin Cities, was founded in 1972. Almost 50 years later, during the COVID-19 pandemic, it started Phone Companions and Coffee Talk. On average, 300 volunteers and callers use Phone Companions each month, and the organization has tallied 10,000 Coffee Talk calls over the past five years.

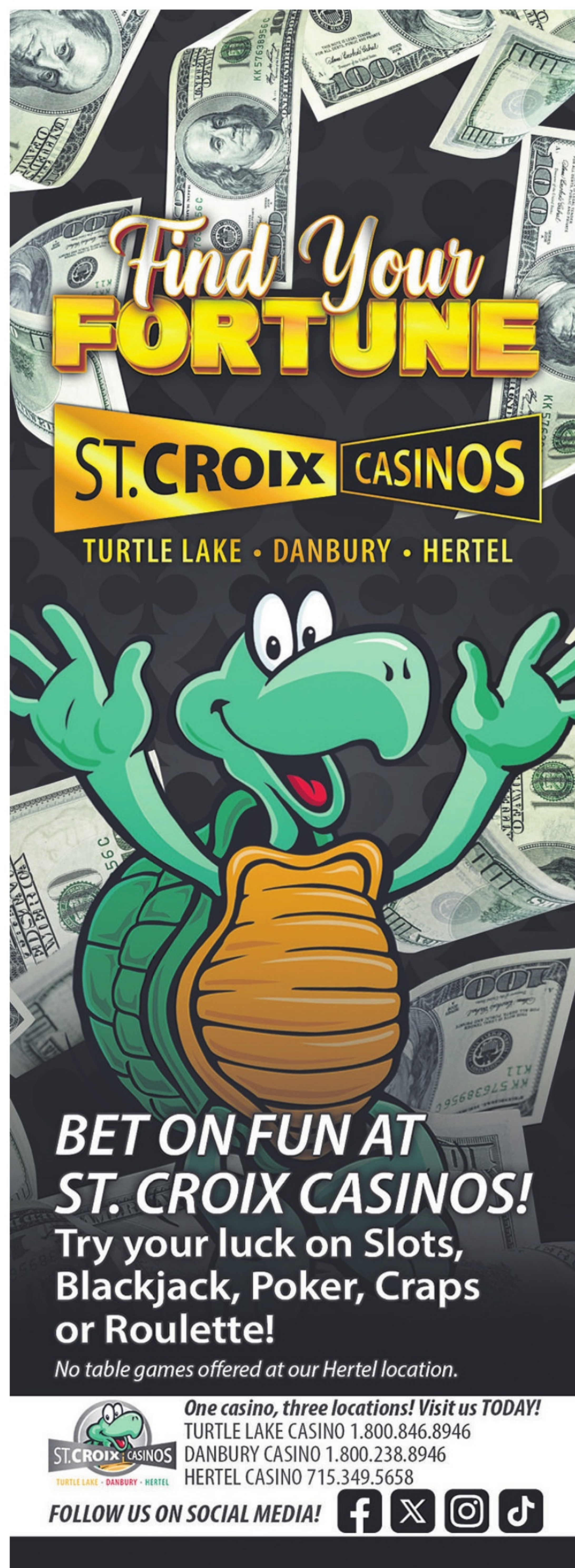
The pandemic brought loneliness to the forefront, spurring companionship programs to help older people combat it. Organizations would connect people with someone to talk to on the phone or take walks with. With the advent of artificial intelligence, robots are substituting for human companionship. For example, in South Korea, which has a high rate of suicide among older adults, more than 12,000 older people have received robotic companions from the government.

At Friends & Co, connection is offered in the form of about 150 phone volunteers and 10 Coffee Talk callers, who live in the community and are willing to listen and converse.

"Older adults have actually said there's something in us calling in and knowing that we're talking to somebody that's not getting paid to talk to us," said Paul Cram, Friends & Co's marketing and communi-

Mary Maas, 86, of St. Paul, with her client Jack. Maas volunteers for the Minnesota-based Friends & Co's program called Phone Companions.

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Mixed signals

The longest-running of the country’s so-called “warm” lines is Friendship Line from the Institute on Aging in San Francisco. During the pandemic, its callers shot up from 4,000 a month to 9,000. Now the organization completes around 16,000 calls per month.

Founded in 1973 by Patrick Arbore, Friendship Line operates as a 24/7 emotional support line available in eight languages for adults over age 60 throughout California. In addition to casual conversation, its staff and volunteers are trained to handle calls related to grief and suicide prevention.

In 2024, the institute published a study that followed 121 older adults using Friendship Line over six months. It reported a decrease in loneliness from 46% to 28%, a

drop in depression rates from 36% to 25% and a reduction in anxiety rates from 63% to 43%.

“As you get older, you start to feel less visible,” said Katy Spence, the senior director of Friendship Line. “And there are things like your health and your social connections that start to decrease.”

Spence said the line is effective for people who need to talk to someone immediately, providing a service that even a face-to-face visit can’t, because help is so swift.

But the research on the effectiveness of phone friendship lines is mixed. A 2015 study led by Veterans Affairs Portland Health Care System found that depressive symptoms remained unchanged in adults over 50 who received regular phone calls, but that in-person visits from family and friends lowered those symptoms.

For around 40 years, the Adventures in Caring Foundation in Santa Barbara, Calif., ran a program called the Medicine of Compas-

sion. It involved college students visiting nursing home residents receiving end-of-life care and emphasized compassion, humanity and in-person connection. Then the pandemic hit, and gone were visits to long-term care facilities. So the foundation created Phone a Friend, a telephone companion-ship program.

“Phone calls are absolutely better than nothing,” said Simon Fox, the foundation’s executive director. “They’re the next best thing.”

When the pandemic ended, the foundation only had resources for one of the programs and resurrected Medicine of Compassion.

“The in-person connection is so much more meaningful and powerful for both the senior and the student,” Fox said.

For many, however, the phone is a better option. It reduces liability issues that could come with a home visit and eliminates travel, which can be a barrier for volunteers.

“Some folks don’t want people



in their homes, you know, for a variety of reasons,” said Angie Perone, director of the Center for Advanced Study of Aging Services at the University of California, Berkeley. “So they just prefer a telephone call.”

After some studies, including a 1991 paper from Indiana University, showed phone lines have little impact on mental health, Perone said it was harder to get funding for “warm” lines. But the older LGBTQ clients she had been working with at a nonprofit were requesting such programs. After a year-long pilot phone program funded by a Michigan foundation and the University of Michigan School of Social Work Gerontology, Perone published a 2019 study that found “warm” lines provided more inclusive and culturally responsive services for LGBTQ older adults at risk of social isolation.

Still, Perone said she would not discount other methods that engage older people, including the AI bots South Korea is using.

As part of the Visiting Companions program from Minnesota-based Friends & Co, client Ruth Ann and volunteer Pat Cook, meet at a restaurant. The nonprofit Friends & Co also created Phone Companions, a remote version of the program.

Joyce Harris, above, who felt lonely after her retirement found companionship through Friends & Co’s phone program.

Friends & Co

“We kind of need a lot of different solutions, and so I think that’s one of many that could work better for some and less for others,” Perone said.

Let’s do lunch

For Harris and Maas in Minnesota, who came of age in the 1950s when long phone conversations fueled female friendships, the calls are filling a crucial need. Their weekly conversations have not only brightened their days but also broadened their perspectives, though they don’t talk about politics as much as they used to.

“Each week it’s just, it’s inspiring,” Maas said.

After the long Minnesota winter, they talked about meeting up for lunch, something they did not get around to last summer. It will be the first in-person outing for two people who feel like old friends.

“This year it’s going to happen,” Maas said. “I can come over and pick her up, and we can go out.”

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