

In lieu of trips, friends and family are gathering virtually

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

The idea was hatched last summer: Six siblings would gather in Washington on April 2 to observe the 50th anniversary of the death of their cousin, Sgt. Richard Elliott, in Vietnam. They would visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, toast Dickie, as he was known, and spend a few days touring the city. Airbnbs were reserved. Flights were booked.

On April 2, at 11 a.m., the siblings, from Upstate New York, Colorado, Florida and Washington, gathered and remembered Dickie, who was 21 when he was killed, engaged to be married that summer. The tribute was, in many ways, just as the family imagined: The group shared pictures of their cousin in his Army uniform, photos of his gravesite and a letter he'd written home. One sister read a piece she'd written about Dickie, and another shared her art. But there was no visit to the Vietnam memorial and there were no comforting hugs. The gathering, of course, took place online.

"It was a wonderful substitute," said Bernadette McMahon, the eldest sibling, who lives on Capitol Hill. McMahon, a retired chemist, taught herself how to host a Zoom meeting and tested it out with each participant beforehand. On the anniversary, everything went as planned, except, McMahon said, it was too early in the day for a toast.

"We're in touch a lot by email and text, but it was really nice to be talking face to face," she said. "We were all really happy we did it."

Six calls replaced by one

Voyagers and vacationers had barely finished canceling their trips early this spring when the same travelers swiftly embraced a pandemic proxy: the online reunion. With travel on indefinite bed rest, families that expected to gather in person have been congregating online for birthdays, anniversaries, graduations and weekly dinners. Unlike in-person reunions, which can require months of tedious planning and can run up credit card bills, these virtual reunions can be planned and held for free, with very little preparation.

Dean Kilpatrick, distinguished professor of clinical psychology at the Medical University of South Carolina, said it's important to remember that being physically isolated is not the same as being psychologically and socially isolated — which can lead to depression.

"When we didn't have technology, they were one and the same," said Kilpatrick, who studies the importance of social connection after exposure to a traumatic



COURTESY OF SHAWN DONNELLY

Shawn Donnelly, top center with her husband, recently celebrated her 58th birthday online. One couple even made a cake, freezing a few slices for the next time they see Donnelly in person.

COMMUNICATION TIPS

Just as in real life, even the best planning can't prevent all snafus. But a little preparation goes a long way. You don't want grandma to get all dressed up only to be flummoxed by her lack of audio, and you don't want to see nothing but tufts of curly hair because your cousin has the screen tilted too low. Below are seven tips and best practices for a virtual victory.

- 1. Plan ahead.** Consider that some participants are busy working, even if they're home. Factor in time zones and find an hour that works for everyone.
- 2. Practice.** If you're new to videoconference technology, watch a training video. Test out your call with at least one other person to see how it works and experiment with features and settings, including audio (headphones are helpful). If you're gathering with less tech-savvy folks, they might appreciate their own dry run, and everyone else will appreciate the smoothness of the operation when you get on for real.
- 3. Get your mute on.** If your meeting has more than a half-dozen participants, consider muting everyone at the beginning to limit background noise; each can unmute before he or she starts speaking.
- 4. Play it safe.** Many schools and businesses have prohibited the use of Zoom, which has had countless security breaches and has since taken measures to better protect meetings. Hosts can increase security by password-protecting a gathering and locking up once it's started. Take time to learn about videoconferencing options. While Zoom is the most popular, many people use Webex, Skype, FaceTime and Google Hangouts.
- 5. Lead your clan.** The bigger the group, the greater need for an emcee to prevent total chaos — unless that's your family's jam. Go around the "room" (from youngest to oldest or west to east, for example) and ask everyone for an update, a pandemic survival tip, a short reading or a book suggestion.

6. Short is sweet. To prevent screen overload, tell everyone you'll be limiting the call. Try 30 minutes and leave them wanting more.

7. Have fun. "Not everything has to be a therapy session," said Dean Kilpatrick, a professor of clinical psychology. "Small talk is okay. Find out how everyone's doing in their worlds, get advice about navigating your world. Tell bad jokes. Laugh."

event. "But now, being physically distant doesn't mean we can't be close emotionally. We need to keep our connection with other people."

Online family reunions first showed up on my radar two weeks ago when my quarantine partner, James, invited me to join him on the couch to catch up with his

31-member family in Minnesota, Tennessee, Virginia, North Carolina and Maryland — the first gathering of all his kinfolk in a dozen years.

Personally, I'm a reluctant video conferencer. During normal times, I'd get in the car and drive to California before you'd find me in a Brady Bunch grid on someone's screen. But as we shelter in place, we're all operating outside our comfort zones. So a few days after James's reunion, going against every introvert and low-tech cell in my body, I planned a same-day reunion for my family.

Unlike James, who watched a couple of Zoom tutorials, I didn't prepare, and it showed. It took 15 minutes to get everyone technologically situated; even then, a cousin in California had to drop out due to audio snags. But what fun once we could all see and hear each other! Between entertaining updates (a 2,000-piece puzzle, TRX workouts, home haircuts), and cameos by dogs and cats, the 40 minutes flew by, and there were more smiles than at our last gathering three years ago, at my grandmother's funeral. As my cousin wrote on social media later, "Grandma Ruth would be very happy" to see us together.

Passover and Easter celebrations last week prompted many families to try meeting online — even staging egg-decorating contests — in lieu of gathering in person. My friend Jeff Fox in Northwest Washington had planned this spring to attend a bat mitzvah in Chicago, a granddaughter's birthday in Berkeley, Calif., and a wedding in Tucson. Instead, he positioned his screen on the kitchen table and logged in to two lively Passover seders. He

reported nervous laughter experiencing familiar Passover rituals through the quarantine lens: washing of the hands, reading about plagues and opening the door to share the meal with friends and strangers — which of course wasn't happening at all. If it had, doorknob disinfecting would have ensued.

David Such, who lives in Louisville, had planned to fly with his wife, son, daughter-in-law and grandson to visit his 85-year-old mother in Florida last week. Once that trip was canceled, he began hosting weekly Sunday dinners on Zoom. In the past month, those meetings expanded to include his five brothers and then his extended family. Before he knew it, there were 50 people from across the country on a recent meeting, just as loud and talkative as they are in person.

"I think it's brought us all together more as a family," said Such, who was laid off from his job at a logistics company recently. "Dad died last year, and Mom likes to see all the brothers together. It makes her laugh. I think even when we're back to normal, this will continue. Instead of making six calls, it's nice to make one."

'It really felt like a party'

Tara Ramchandani, a civil rights lawyer in Washington, has used Zoom extensively for work — its original purpose. After her family canceled plans for a cousin's wedding next month in Los Angeles, she planned a reunion, sending invitations to family on the East Coast and in England and India through WhatsApp.

"It was challenging finding a time to work for everyone with three time zones," she said. "Lunchtime on Saturday was after dinner in India and late afternoon in London." The 26-person call included three generations. It worked out so well, the family repeated it the following week.

Birthday parties have also become a regular fixture on Zoom, as revelers long for cheerful connections during a time that for many has been unsettling, scary and sad.

Shawn Donnelly, a massage therapist in Southwest Washington, celebrated her 58th birthday online two weeks ago. "The week before, my husband and I were supposed to be in California for Opening Day at Dodger Stadium," said Donnelly, a big baseball fan whose birthday celebrations, like mine, often last a full month. "But covid puts everything in perspective. Now, none of that matters."

On her birthday, Donnelly hung a banner, blew up balloons, frosted a cake and poured champagne. Friends and family in California, Baltimore, Bethesda and Wash-

ington joined the party, with one couple baking a cake and freezing a few slices for the next time they see Donnelly in person. She delighted in going around the Zoom room and explaining her connection with each of the attendees and then sharing her birthday wish for each person.

"It really felt like a party," Donnelly said. "I was exhausted after talking for two hours. I missed the physical contact, but it's amazing we can shelter in place yet still reach out and connect."

Earlier this month, Jim Martens, a software engineer in Denver, hosted an open house through Google Meet to celebrate his 46th birthday. About 60 people — family, longtime friends, work acquaintances, martial arts buddies and gamer pals — stopped by over three hours, just as they would for a traditional party. And just a like a regular party, Martens noted with a laugh, some people dominated the conversation.

One friend played "Happy Birthday" on the bagpipes, another played an Indian stringed instrument called the sarod, and Martens's wife played the accordion. "There were people who hadn't seen each other for 20 years and who geographically couldn't have been together," Martens said. "It was so great to see everyone on my birthday and explore different ways of connecting. That's what travel's all about — exploration."

Matt Schaar, who lives on Capitol Hill and works for a nonprofit organization, had planned to visit his parents in South Dakota this spring. Instead, he has been setting up family video calls on a weekly basis, connecting with South Dakota, Boston and San Jose. "There's a loss in nonverbal communication that happens," Schaar said. "When you see someone in a rectangular box, you can't feel their emotions and catch the nuances. But it's an improvement from a phone call."

If it's tough for some adults to adjust, it can be mind-blowing for kids. One of Schaar's gatherings included a birthday party for his 3-year-old niece in California.

"They had a birthday cake, and we all tried to sing 'Happy Birthday' in sync, which of course was impossible," Schaar said. "She started bawling in the middle of it. I think she recognized the existential dread of seeing her friends, but they were on the screen, not there with her." Schaar, missing his co-workers, can relate. "That's exactly how I feel every day working virtually."

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