



HISTORY & CULTURE | CORONAVIRUS COVERAGE

In America's oldest active retirement community, joy endures through the pandemic

An intimate look at how the residents of Sun City, Arizona have found ways to maintain their dynamic lifestyle

Members of the Sun City Poms, a cheerleading squad, have been hula hooping together outside since the COVID-19 pandemic stopped their regular practices. The Poms are one of many clubs and teams in Sun City, a community fostering active retirement.

5 MINUTE READ

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY KENDRICK BRINSON



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PEGGY PARSONS HAD a dream. In her eighth decade she wanted to be a cheerleader. So she convinced her husband Bill to pack up their house and move 15 minutes down the road to Sun City, Arizona, a community with palm trees and cactus-lined streets where 40,000-some residents—who average 73.5 years of age—can join more than 130 clubs, from mahjong and pickleball to tapdancing and cheerleading.

It was not the first (or farthest) move for Parsons, now 79. But it was a momentous one. She and Bill, now 92, are residents of what was the first community of its kind when it opened in 1960. Located in Maricopa County, less than 30 minutes northwest of Phoenix, Sun City is designed to foster active retirement, to provide people over 55 a full life after work and raising children.

With its seven recreational centers and eight golf courses, Sun City is “like Disneyland for seniors,” Peggy said. “It’s like living permanently on vacation, but you don’t have to live out of your suitcase.”

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Left: An aerial view of Sun City, Arizona, which was opened in 1960 to give people over 55 a home where they could still be active.
Right: A sign at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church in Sun City urges residents to stay... [Read More](#)



A crowd gathers at the Sun Bowl Amphitheater to watch Bella Donna, a Fleetwood Mac tribute band in October 2014.



A Sun City pickleball game in October 2017. After the shutdown, members of the pickleball club set up portable nets in a church parking lot so they could keep playing outdoors. "Pickleball is so addictive," says Lynda Skaggs, whose husband Jeff also plays. "I get antsy if I don't play..." [Read More](#)



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But in March, the bustle and energy that made Sun City so appealing to its residents lurched to a halt. The community's residents are considered particularly susceptible to the virus due to their age. As of October 22, the county where they live, Arizona's most populous, has had 65 percent of all COVID-19 cases in the state. Local news estimates that there are around 850 cases in the Sun City area.

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In this insular community, the pandemic poses problems large and small. Suddenly, people had "nothing to do and all day to do it," says 72-year-old Bill Pearson, who has lived here for 17 years. All of the community's recreation

centers were closed, as were the amphitheater, softball field, bowling centers, and dog park. Golf, which Arizona governor Doug Ducey declared an essential service, was permitted to continue.



The 3,000-capacity Sun Bowl Amphitheater has been empty since March. All shows have been cancelled and will not resume until 2021.



One of Sun City's 30-plus softball teams warms up before a game in December 2013. Tait Douglas, right, joined a team when he moved to the community in 1990 and has played two games a week during the season since then. In February, the 92-year-old retired from the game but... [Read More](#)





The Sun City Poms practiced twice a week for three hours and performed 12 parades and 50 shows a season before the pandemic.

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Left: Peggy Parsons, 79, is vice president of the Poms and moved to Sun City specifically to join the team. She's written two novels during quarantine, one of which has already been published.
Right: Poms president Geri Braddock, 73, doesn't believe the group will practice... [Read More](#)





The Sun City Poms, currently led by Braddock and Parsons, started in 1979 when the Sun City Saints, a women's softball team, had trouble drawing a crowd. "No one came to watch, so they decided they needed cheerleaders. And it worked!" says Geri.

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For some, social distancing and shelter-in-place rules meant they were cut off from their social circles. Before the pandemic, Marilyn Richling, 76, and her husband John, 73, spent much of their time square dancing with friends. Their vulnerability due to preexisting medical conditions means that they no longer leave their home.

"[Square dancing] was my only outlet, other than church and family. Church shut down. Square dancing shut down," Marilyn said. "It was stay at home and do nothing."



Left: The Sun City Squares, a square and round dancing club with more than 60 members, met twice a week before the pandemic. They haven't been able to dance together since March. **Right:** Marilyn Richling, president of the Sun City Squares, and her husband, John... [Read More](#)



Some residents have adapted. Every morning at 6 a.m., the pickleball players put up portable nets and chalk three courts onto the pavement of a church parking lot. The Desert Aires, a group of barbershop singers, learned to use Zoom so they could rehearse. Jeff Skaggs, 69, one half of a two-man band called Dos Boomers, invited neighbors to bring lawn chairs to the cul de sac in front of his home for a free outdoor concert.

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Players compete in a two-day lawn bowling tournament near a Sun City recreation center in December 2013.



John Stewart, 84, stands outside his house in Sun City, where he has lived with his wife Dora, 80, for 23 years. Originally from Scotland, the couple has won national lawn bowling... [Read More](#)

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The Sun City Aqua Suns, a synchronized swimming team, walk the red carpet at the Lakeview Recreation Center before a performance in December 2010.



Left: Sun City residents play water volleyball at one of the community's seven recreation centers in 2017. Before the pandemic, the team played games three times a week.
Right: Tracy Schenck, 57, moved to Sun City from Denver in May 2019. "I was 55 and in..." [Read More](#)



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Purple Woods, 78, was born dancing, she says. Before the pandemic she danced four nights a week at Sun City's dancing clubs. "That's the reason I came down here," she says. "In fact, in... [Read More](#)

As vice president of the Sun City Poms cheerleading squad, as well as the treasurer of the Tip Top Dancers tap club, Parsons is missing the action. In a typical year, the Poms march in 12 parades and put on 50 shows a season. "A lot of [my time was] spent dancing," she said. "Once you retire, it's like how did I ever have time to work?"

The Sun City Poms don't think they can practice again until next year, says team president Geri Braddock. But that hasn't stopped them from seeing each other. After Geri found two hula hoops in her garage, they realized they could all hula hoop outside together safely. They now meet once a week at 7 a.m. in a teammate's backyard.

"My whole insides were happy again. When we started this, I had this happy glow all day long," said Kathy Villa, 63, who is also in the yoga club, the tai chi club, and the tap club. "We got to see friends and socialize and speak to people face to face. It was a wonderful day."

For many of the women, the Poms are more than just a team. Cheryl Jackson, 68, left behind four children, nine grandchildren, and a city she knew to move to Sun City nine years ago, and the cheerleaders have become her friends, sisters, and support system. "What's wrong with joy?" she said. "It's something we definitely need now." 📺

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Left: Family and friends release balloons at the memorial service for Monte Haag, who moved to Sun City in 2000 and died in December 2010 in a plane crash.
Right: Loretta Chapman, 66, walks her dogs Buster and Bubby in her golf cart four times... [Read More](#)



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Many Sun City residents have tried to make the most of the quarantine. "I don't really feel like I've been suppressed at all," says Lynda Skaggs. "I love living here. I've made more friends in the last three years than the last 25."

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