

Every life matters. Toronto home hit hard by the pandemic treated Raymond Harden with dignity to the end



By **Rosie DiManno** Toronto Star Columnist
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Raymond Harden, who died this month at age 93, enlisted in the Royal Canadian Army and drove a transport truck in the Second World War – then married his sweetheart.

Raymond Harden was an old man, 93 years of age.

Some might say he'd enjoyed a long life and that was certainly true. Except every loss is equal. No life counts more than any other, even if measured in ladles rather than teaspoons. The generation that made this country, the repository of our collective memory, is being ravaged by the coronavirus pandemic. They go meekly, for the most part, without "heroic" medical intervention to stave off the inevitable.

We need to be reminded of this, the precious quality of these victims, as appalling stories emerge of the frail and elderly warehoused in sloppy facilities, left to fester in their own bodily waste, diapers unchanged, fallen to the floor. At least two residents were discovered dead in their bed, the Montreal Gazette reported last week, when public health officials and police entered the Residence Herron in Dorval, Que., near Trudeau airport. The institution, described as a luxury residence that charged up to \$10,000 a month, had been largely deserted by staff.

Was that a grotesque anomaly? Hard to say, as COVID-19 devastates facilities for the aged, outbreaks now registered at more than 100 senior-care homes in Ontario.

So maybe Harden was among the lucky — cared for with tenderness by staff who'd long tended to the nonagenarian. His family is deeply beholden for that.

This is the story of one man's death, one man's life. Because each one matters. They're not just numbers on a modelling graph.

Harden died April 3 in the long-term-care wing of the St. Clair O'Connor community complex in East Toronto. Comforted by familiar voices but without family at his bedside because the coronavirus has sequestered love.

Harden was a man with a backstory. He had a *presence* and now there is only absence.

A huge Blue Jays fan, with a Blue Jays blanket spread across his bed, often with a Blue Jays cap on his head. When the season was cancelled — at the very least postponed — that's when he truly understood that what was happening was very bad indeed.

A person defined by strong Christian values who respected all faiths, part of his church's community — O'Connor was founded by two Mennonite churches. His own father had been a United Church minister.

At 16, he'd enlisted in the Royal Canadian Army during the Second World War, driving a transport truck providing supplies along the Alaska Highway. After the war, he married his sweetheart, Lorraine. Together they raised their family in Don Mills. He worked for many years as a supply chain management supervisor with British-American Oil, Gulf Oil and later Petro Canada.

An unremarkable life, perhaps. As most of us have unremarkable lives, or maybe remarkable only to ourselves. A perfectly ordinary man. And beloved.

“Our last family gathering with Dad at St. Clair O’Connor was on March 8 and it was wonderful,” his son Craig recounts by email. “We played his favourite hymns on the piano in the family room. We had no idea that would be our last family gathering with him, but within days we had stopped visiting the nursing home to avoid contracting or spreading the virus. We explained to my dad that we would be talking by phone for a while.”

Raymond Harden’s first symptoms appeared on March 14. The family was informed immediately by CEO Mary Hoare.

There had, as of this weekend, been seven deaths at the home and at least nine staff had tested positive.

“During the outbreak, our family regularly spoke with our dad on the phone and we had two video chats with him, which were arranged just before his passing,” Craig Harden continues. “We were told we could have as many as we needed.

“Our family explained to (dad) over the phone that there was a pandemic and that the long-term-care home was on lockdown and that we couldn’t visit. We told him that we had to talk by phone as a result, and reassured him that we were there for him and he could always call us at any time. He was more concerned for his family and often asked how we were doing.”

The son is keen to express how considerate and compassion the home’s staff and CEO had been.

“We’re absolutely satisfied — our father received exceptional and heroic care from medical, nursing and personal support staff working under very difficult and extreme conditions.”

Hoare stayed on the premises every weekend. As well, the family received clear information from the home’s medical director, Dr. Abo Akintan, who “explained to us how the COVID-19 virus might impact on our father given his underlying medical condition of diabetes.”

The dietitian called first, with daily updates from the home’s quality co-ordinator on Harden’s food and fluid intake, that he’d get nutritional liquid meal supplement if his appetite flagged. Old, sickly people, they just stop eating.

But Raymond Harden had made it abundantly clear he did not wish to be transferred to a hospital intensive-care unit, even as his condition worsened.

“It was always his choice, together with us,” his son emphasizes. “He was 93 with underlying conditions, and we were all aware how hard a trip to the hospital could be, and how it can often lead to a deterioration in an elderly person’s condition and quality of life. My dad wanted to pass away at home at St. Clair O’Connor if it came to it, and that seemed natural to us; we never pressured him to choose otherwise.”

As so many others have endured — and continue to endure as the pandemic drives inexorably toward peak levels later this month and into May, according to authorities — separation was unspeakably hard. Unable to touch, to hold a loved one’s hand.

“It was difficult not to be at our father’s side when he passed, but it was obvious to us that it was the right thing to stay away, and St. Clair O’Connor staff went beyond the call of duty to keep us connected with him with video conferences and calls.

“When we were alerted by staff that he was slipping away, with great compassion they arranged for the family to speak on the phone. We had the chance to tell him how much we loved him, what he meant to us, and what a wonderful dad he is to each of us. We assured him that we would see him again some time and we would all be together.”

He adds: “Although he was unable to speak, the staff on the phone told us when he was lifting his hands to acknowledge us — we were so grateful.”

The director of long-term-care services, Vanda Cozier, phoned immediately after Raymond Harden passed. She told the family that “from the outset of his illness, our father was a ‘fighter’ and never gave up until the very end.”

We shall all arrive there someday — the very end. We all make that final voyage into the unknown alone.

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