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One of the granddaughters of Helen Thomas sent the lawn signs that decorated the East River Road home of the Island's newest centenarian. "This is what she woke up to," daughter Betty Ruhland said. The signs were part of a day of celebrating that included a parade of cars by the Thomas house.

Islander celebrates 100th birthday with drive-by party

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LARRY AUSTIN
 Island Dispatch Editor

The COVID-19 pandemic has restricted social gatherings, but that didn't stop friends from helping Islander Helen Thomas celebrate her 100th birthday in a big way.

A caravan of about 50 vehicles cruised by the East River Road home of Thomas just before noon Wednesday with horns honking and with drivers shouting "Happy birthday" greetings and delivering gifts.

The drive-by birthday parade was organized by Karen Figler, Thomas' aerobic instructor. Yes, that's right: aerobic instructor. Thomas drives to St. Stephen's twice a week to take the class from Figler and credits aerobics and staying fit as part of the secret to her longevity.

"The good Lord wants me here for something," she added.

The drive-by cruise replaced a planned ocean cruise out of New York Harbor to Bermuda that the COVID-19 pandemic canceled, said Betty Ruhland, one of Helen's daughters along with Mary Scott and Jane Black. Ruhland said "almost the whole damn fam" made the trip for the birthday. Born July 1, 1920, Thomas has three daughters, three grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren.

Many who couldn't make the trip to the Island sent messages via video, Ruhland said. Greetings came from some of the many people she's met in her travels, including a waiter from Bali who she met on a cruise on the Queen Mary II singing "Happy Birthday" to her.

Ruhland said the number of people who drove by and who sent messages are "a vision of the lives you've touched, and when people go out of their way to do something for someone, it means they touched your life."

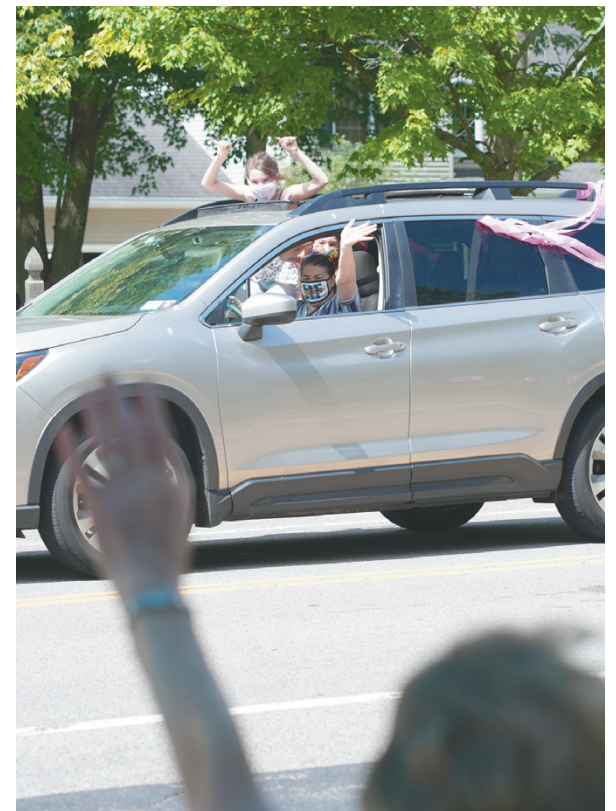
Figler said there were about 50 cars, with at least 100 people



Helen Thomas waves as she watches dozens of drivers cruise by her East River Road home honking their horns and yelling birthday wishes to her. Thomas turned 100 Wednesday.



"We couldn't have had a bigger party than that," Helen said after the last of the cars cruised by her house, calling it "overwhelming."



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