

[51 lost lives: A portrait of the pandemic's tragic toll in America's nursing homes](#)

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***About this story:** "51 Lost Lives" was a major reporting project from the Medill Investigative Lab and The Washington Post that profiled covid-19 victims in nursing homes in every state. The following four stories were written by me. The full story (with all 51 profiles) is linked above.*

Henrietta Woods worked for social justice, voting rights.

March 30, Missouri

Henrietta Woods was in her 30s when she started volunteering to help make the polls in St. Louis more accessible to low-income voters.

She went on to spend years with the now-defunct Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, eventually attending meetings with her granddaughter in tow. The pair played spades while Woods discussed housing inequality and voter registration drives.

The grandmother of 14, a resident at the Life Care Center of St. Louis, [died March 30](#). She was 89.

Born in Memphis, Woods was 13 when her mother died. After briefly living with her father and stepmother, she settled in with her aunt. The two later moved to St. Louis, where Woods would spend the rest of her life.

A dietitian at St. Louis University Hospital, Woods, who married and later divorced, was proud of being able to put her five children through Catholic school and purchase a two-story house where two generations of her family would live.

"It wasn't a mansion. It was a small house. But people say wealth is starting with homeownership, so she did that," said LaTosha Hayes, her granddaughter.

Woods was heavily involved in the St. Louis community, participating in marches for economic, social and racial justice, working for elected officials and offering community members rides to nearby polling centers during elections. Freeman Bosley Jr., the city's first Black mayor, knew Woods by name, said her granddaughter Ashanti Woods.

Woods was a member of the Union Avenue Christian Church. When she moved into the nursing home in 2014, Hayes said the parishioners remained an essential support system, particularly after Woods suffered a stroke in 2019.

"If I didn't drop her off [at church], they picked her up," Hayes said. "They made her feel special, whether she was in a nursing home or at church."

The onset of the coronavirus and lockdown of the nursing home threw Woods into a deep depression.

“My grandmother had nine lives,” Hayes said. “Each time we thought it was about to be the end, she just kept coming back. I think the depression of being by herself as long as she was contributed to her death.”

— *Michael Korsh*

Johnny James helped establish water treatment plants in developing countries.

April 9, Connecticut

In 1968, when Roberta James-Brown was 7 years old, a car sped through a stop sign and struck the family’s Rambler near their home in Bloomfield, Conn.

Though her mother and three siblings were unharmed, James-Brown had a broken tooth and cuts on her face. A stranger took her to the emergency room for stitches. Soon, her father rushed in from work and whisked her home.

“It was one of those ‘hero moments,’ where my big, strong dad was carrying me to the car,” James-Brown recalled.

Johnny James, a father of four who helped establish water treatment in developing countries, [died April 9](#) at Kimberly Hall North in Windsor, Conn. He was 85.

Born to farmers in Valdosta, Ga., James was one of eight children. He rose early to tend the livestock, cornfield and watermelon patch before heading to school. After he graduated from high school in 1950 at 16, he waited two years and joined the Army.

In 1956, he moved to Hartford with his wife, Pauline, and worked as a machinist. He later inspected nuclear boilers and eventually started his own company making casting molds.

Three of his four children were born in Hartford, where his wife owned a hair salon. In the 1970s, James traveled to the Philippines and later to Haiti to help establish water treatment facilities.

“I had working parents, and they had a strong work ethic,” James-Brown said. “And that instilled a strong work ethic in the kids that they raised.”

After the couple divorced, James moved back to Georgia. He later moved into the nursing home in Connecticut, where his daughter lives. Though he had dementia, he could always remember the names of his great-grandchildren, Za’Niyah and Athen, who would visit with Hershey’s bars.

“He loved sharing the chocolate with them,” James-Brown said. “It was their thing.”

— *Michael Korsh*

Edna McBride persevered through painful losses.

April 24, Idaho

When she was a kid, Edna McBride's nickname was "Toughie."

Born in Walla Walla, Wash., and raised in the farming community of Southwick, Idaho, she spent hours chasing cows and ducks around her family's pond. She hunted deer to help put food on the table and looked after her four siblings.

McBride, a great-great-grandmother who spent 25 years serving drinks to sawmill workers, [died](#) April 24 at the Life Care Center of Lewiston. She had just celebrated her 100th birthday.

McBride spent most of her life in Idaho. She dropped out of school after eighth grade and went on to marry John Roy Watson, a sawmill worker. The couple had four children before Watson died in 1954, leaving McBride a widow in her 30s.

She remarried and had two more children before divorcing her second husband in 1980. As a single mother, she worked service jobs in restaurants and bars. She married a third time but later divorced.

"Her sole existence was to make sure that her kids were taken care of, as well as she could do on her own most of the time," said Catherine Voss, her daughter.

McBride spent years working as a bartender at Joe's Roundup Tavern in Clarkston, Wash., where sawmill workers in the small town on the Idaho-Washington border would stop by for drinks and conversation.

"You knew that when you were in Joe's and my mom was bartending, you didn't have to worry about much," Voss said.

McBride suffered the loss of three of her grown children. One son died in the Vietnam War, another in a motorcycle accident years later. Her daughter suffered a brain aneurysm.

"As the saying goes, you should never lose your kids. And she lost three of them, so it was a pretty difficult situation for her," Voss said. "But she made it. She survived ... and I think it made her stronger in the long run."

McBride moved into the nursing home as her eyesight weakened. In January, her family — 10 grandchildren, six great-grandchildren and two great-great-grandchildren — gathered to celebrate her 100th birthday. As she told stories from a century of life, Voss said her mother's mind was as strong as ever.

“All I can say about [covid-19] is it’s a long, miserable, painful death,” Voss said. “And that’s what my mom experienced for the last two weeks of her life. It just slowly sucked the life out of her. And it was not something I ever want to go through again.”

— *Michael Korsh*

Lorene Miller, through job at the bank, knew everyone in town.

May 27, Wyoming

Christmas was Lorene Miller’s favorite time of year.

At home in Worland, Wyo., about 140 miles from Yellowstone National Park, she dressed in colorful Christmas vests and served candied popcorn and burnt-sugar ice cream to her son, two grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Miller lost her own mother at a young age and vowed to always put her family first, relatives said.

A retired banker, Miller [died May 27](#) at the Worland Healthcare & Rehabilitation Center. She was 96 and had shared a room with her husband of 76 years, who died a week earlier amid a coronavirus outbreak at the home.

Miller grew up in Missouri without much family. Her mother died when Miller was 12, and her father abandoned the family, forcing Miller and her sister to live with relatives on family farms. She married her high school sweetheart in 1943. Johnny Miller, who was serving in the Navy during the war, received a one-day pass to attend his wedding ceremony.

The couple had a son, Mickey, who died of cancer at 12. They had a second son, and soon, Miller built her life around family, friends and the church.

She worked at Stockgrowers State Bank in Worland for 24 years, first as a teller, then head teller, then head of bookkeeping. Once, in 1975, she hustled employees to safety in a mechanical room when a gunman began to fire, said her son Dan Miller. No one was injured.

Working at the bank allowed Miller to get to know nearly everyone in the community of 5,000 by name.

Every winter, Miller and her husband rented a camper and traveled to a campground in Brownsville, Tex., to play cards and line dance until the Worland winter melted away.

The couple moved together into the nursing home on April 15. With declining mobility, they decided they needed more help, their son said. Weeks later, several residents at the center tested positive for the coronavirus.

Miller’s husband died first.

“Yes, she was positive for coronavirus, but I believe that her [death] was more from a broken heart,” said Chelsey Miller, the couple’s granddaughter.

Miller is buried next to her husband in a cemetery in Worland. She is dressed in a Christmas vest.

— *Michael Korsh*