



St. Patrick's Residence Nursing & Rehabilitation resident Mary Potthast, 102, smiles Tuesday at the home's 1400 Brookdale Road facility in Naperville.
TESS KENNY/NAPERVILLE SUN PHOTOS

REACHING TRIPLE DIGITS

Nine residents of Naperville nursing home celebrating big birthdays this year

By Tess Kenny
Naperville Sun

Readying herself to have her picture taken, Frances Trombino showed off her freshly painted nails. One by one, her friends followed suit. Christine Cappetta's eyes lit up. Alice Figlo struck a pose. Grace Pecora smiled softly. Mary Potthast laughed.

The years have nothing on them.

The women are five of nine residents at St. Patrick's Residence Nursing & Rehabilitation that are celebrating birthdays in the triple digits this year. For a few hours Tuesday morning, the women took some time out of their day at the Naperville nursing home to

reminisce about their long lives.

They spoke about children, grandchildren, spouses, sports, work and travel. They encouraged — and exuded — kindness, resolve and graciousness. Kinship, too.

"Those are my friends!" one of the women exclaimed as they sat together Tuesday.

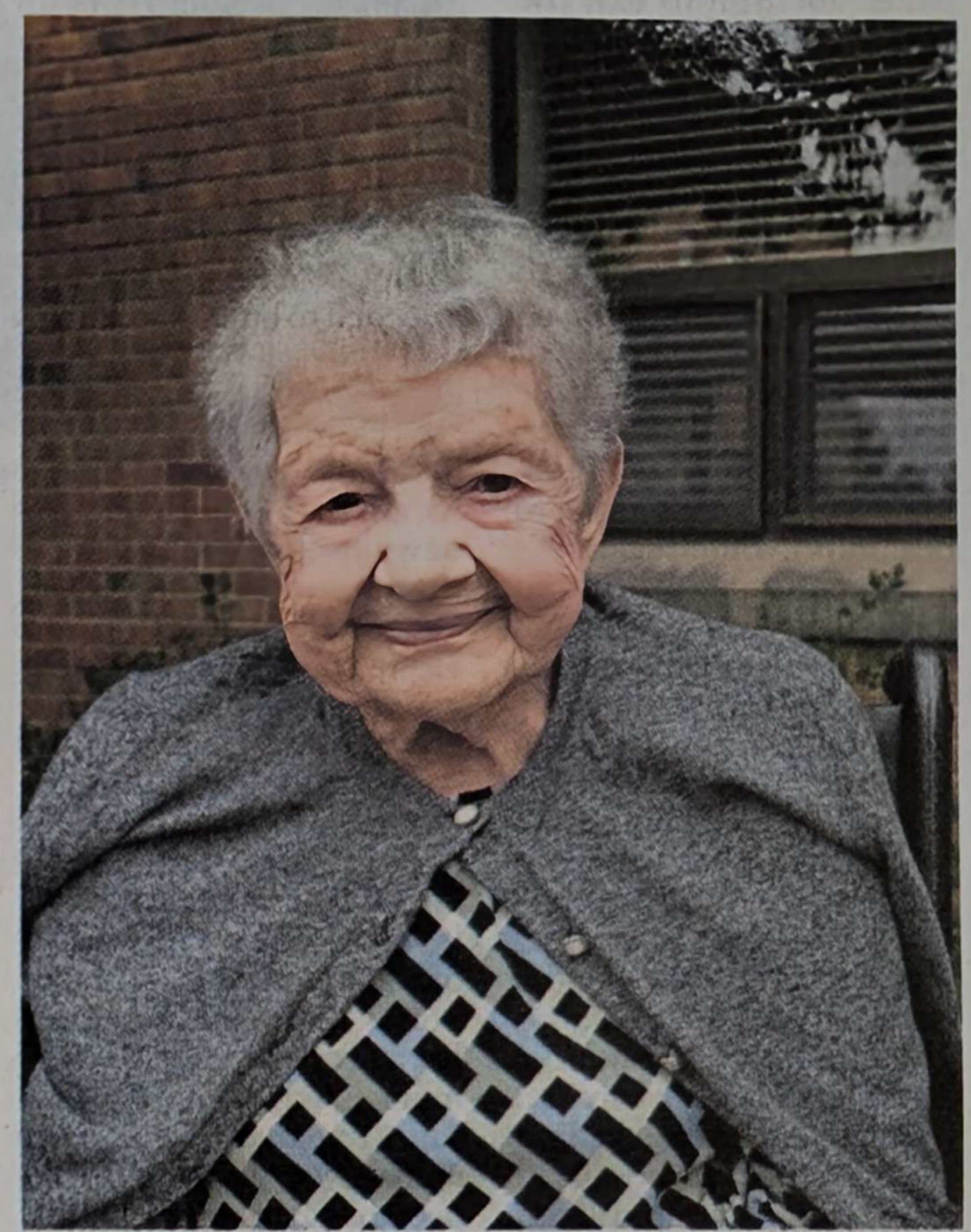
Recent years have brought the women to St. Patrick's, a 180-bed long-term nursing and short-term rehabilitation facility run by Carmelite nuns just outside Naperville's downtown. But the decades before dealt each a different hand.

Mary Potthast grew up on a farm 40 to 50 miles outside of St. Louis. She was born on June 6,

Turn to Triple, Page 3



Alice Figlo, 101, strikes a pose Tuesday at the St. Patrick's facility.



St. Patrick's Residence Nursing & Rehabilitation residents Frances Trombino, 102, from left, Christine Cappetta, 101, and Grace Pecora, 103. TESS KENNY/NAPERVILLE SUN PHOTOS

Triple

from Page 1

1922. Last month, she rang in her 102nd birthday.

One of eight children, Potthast said growing up on a farm made her "a sturdy kid." She used to make haystacks, she said. If asked to milk a cow today, Potthast assured she could. She stayed on her family's farm until she was about 16 and by 18, she had taken her first vows to become a nun.

Potthast went on to teach at Catholic schools around Chicago's western suburbs, eventually rising the ranks to principal, for more than 30 years. She taught in Aurora, Lombard, Carol Stream and Joliet, she said.

After her teaching career, Potthast joined forces in the 1980s with another nun and a DuPage County priest, both of whom have now passed, to help start St. Daniel the

Prophet Church in Wheaton, which still stands today. Her faith has been a through line for her whole life, especially in her later years, she said.

These days, passing through the halls of St. Patrick's, where she's lived since 2022, Potthast doesn't let a person walk by without saying hello and letting them know what she believes in. She's steadfastly unafraid in speaking her mind.

"They don't have to like me," she quipped.

On average, residents stay at St. Patrick's for three to five years, says Melissa Hageman, marketing and development director for the facility. They often move in after living at their children's homes or in assisted living because they're in need of a higher level of senior care, she said.

Hageman relishes the time she is allotted with residents.

"It's their home, and we are cherishing those final days with them," she said. "We are getting to know their families. We're getting to be a part of that journey with them."

To that end, seeing residents celebrate 100 years, sometimes more, is a milestone, Hageman said.

"Knowing that my grandparents never hit that 100 milestone, and to look at our nine residents total (that have or are going to reach that this year) is amazing," she said. "And you get to know their stories, get to know who they were. ... It's a celebration for their families, but it's also a celebration for us to know that we were a part of that."

As Grace Pecora reflected on her 103 years so far, she continually came back to the same five words: "It was a good life."

Pecora was born and raised in Roseland on Chica-

go's Far South Side. Her birthday is May 22, 1921. Growing up in Chicago, she said the winters were cold but for the most part, she liked it. She met her husband in grammar school. He played the accordion, she said. She worked as a secretary.

Pecora used to love going to baseball games. Asked what her favorite team is, she smirked shyly.

"The Cubs," she said. Together, she and her husband had two sons. Their family has since grown to include six grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

"It was a good life," she said.

As it happens, fellow resident and friend Alice Figlo also grew up in Roseland. But the two didn't meet before they moved to St. Patrick's.

Figlo turned 101 on April 19. Her parents were from

what was formerly Czechoslovakia. They moved for a better life, she said.

Figlo grew up to be an artist. She received a scholarship from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, she said. After college, she put together Christmas window displays in downtown Chicago. Then she got married and started a family. She and her husband were married for 64 years before he passed away.

Figlo still dabbles in art when she can find the time. Asked if she had any advice for younger generations, Figlo said, "Just keep going."

Resilience is something Frances Trombino also offered in spades. Trombino, who will turn 103 in December, recently lost her son. She misses him, she said.

He was a good golfer, she said, a small golf broche adorning her sweater.

Trombino lived in Long Island, New York, for most

of her life. She moved to Illinois to be closer to family and has been at St. Patrick's since last year. But between her son dying and moving, it hasn't been easy, she said.

Still, Figlo resolved, "You have to do what you have to do when the time comes. You gotta be strong. And I am strong."

Christine Cappetta added another prescription to her friends' wisdom Tuesday: be kind. Cappetta will be turning 102 later this month. She came to St. Patrick's in 2022. As she reminisced this week, Cappetta donned a pink and blue bow around her collar and wore pink lipstick.

Cappetta loves music and dancing, she said. But most of all, she spoke about the importance of kindness.

"I'm telling you, be kind. Just be kind. It is so simple. ... It really is."

tkenny@chicagotribune.com