

Happy 50th Anniversary!



When Donna and Charles Kuttner walked into Kesser Israel for the first time in 1985, they knew they'd found their home.

"Everyone was so friendly and welcoming," Donna recalls. "It wasn't pretending to be anything – it just 'was.'"

"It felt like the home I'd been in, and was coming back to," adds Charles.

The couple – who are celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary on Jan. 22 – lived in rural Linn County at the time, and had been encouraged to come to High Holiday services by Kurt and Susie Phillip, friends who lived in Corvallis.

Over the years, they've grown and changed with the community – much as they have in their marriage.

"Fifty years is a long time," Donna reflects. "The only way you can make that work is to accept and respect the person for who they are, and who they will be as they change over time."

"We've given each other room to grow," she adds, "and we've both benefitted from our relationship."

The Kuttners, both Houston natives, knew the other's parents, but didn't meet each other until both were in their 20s – Donna then teaching music in Galveston, and Charles in medical school at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, the state's oldest medical school.

The first date, set up by a mutual friend, didn't go well. "He did not impress me at all," Donna says, allowing that she did have a migraine at the time. But two weeks later, after a movie date, they talked and talked – and discovered a lot of shared interests, from favorite movies to a range of books, including *Winnie Ille Pu*, the Latin edition of A.A. Milne's classic children's book, *Winnie the Pooh*.

A year after they met, Charles proposed – and they were married two weeks later, during a three-day weekend break in Charles' medical school schedule. Since then, they've had three additional weddings (Reform, Conservative and Orthodox) as Donna completed her conversion to Judaism, and as the couple grew increasingly more observant over the decades.

"I was searching religiously, in college," says Charles, who grew up in a large Reform temple in Houston. "I knew I was done with Judaism." But he and Donna connected with Rabbi Samuel Stahl of Bnai Israel, a smaller Reform congregation in Galveston, who Charles said encouraged his congregants to embrace Jewish traditions and emphasized spirituality.

At each step they took, Charles said, "We kept asking ourselves, 'What else does HaShem want from us?'"

Their religious journeys paralleled their geographic wanderings. From 1973-1976, they lived in San Francisco while Charles completed his residency in psychiatry, and joined a Conservative synagogue. When they moved to Oregon, they joined Beit Am, the Mid-Willamette Jewish Community, in Corvallis.

"We would not have moved there if there had not been some kind of Jewish community," Donna says. She remembers being concerned because there was no Jewish school in the area for their newborn daughter, Arwen. Her rabbi in San Francisco advised that "it's a good thing to not always be a descendant, but to be an ancestor" – in other words, "So go and do something."

And so they did, and so they have. Both were involved in Beit Am, with Charles serving as president of the community in its early years, and Donna being involved in other aspects of the congregation as she earned two master's degrees and a PhD in public health. They've been active Kesser members since 1985, though they didn't move to Portland – and within walking distance of the shul – until 2001.

In their decades at Kesser, Donna has served in all aspects of the congregation, from years on the Board of Directors in an array of roles to developing the congregation's Yizkor Book project to creating the artwork featured in the Capitol Highway building's mechitzah.

Charles has been a stalwart attendee at the daily minyans (pre-COVID), and for many years was Kesser's volunteer "building manager," the go-to guy for adjusting timers, replacing lightbulbs and a host of other unglamorous tasks. Both he and Donna are enthusiastic

participants in many adult education programs, and – also pre-COVID – exemplars of the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim*, welcoming guests.

A few specific memories about Donna: Her hours of help in boxing up the contents of the Meade Street shul after the 2007 sale of the building; cataloguing the shul's Torah mantels, ark covers and other textiles; and, for more than a decade, polishing Kesser's silver Torah crown before the High Holidays. At the same time, she has been a longtime volunteer with the Chevra Kadisha of Portland, and currently – with Adele Epstein – is co-leader of the women's section.

This past year has been challenging – especially with COVID restrictions and, this fall, surgery for Charles necessitated by radiation damage from long-ago cancer treatment.

“It's hard to be so estranged from the community,” Donna says. But – as her long-ago rabbi counseled – she decided to “do something.” She's been baking challahs and distributing them to a small group of regulars. “That's my substitution for hospitality.”

They'll have a quiet, just-the-two-of-them anniversary celebration. Their daughter, Arwen, a Jewish day school teacher, her husband Uri Ruttenberg, and granddaughter, Naomi, 14, live in Englewood, N.J. Charles' son, Jason, a clinical supervisor with a firm providing mental health services to adolescent dependents of military families, and his wife, Carrie, live in Honolulu, and Jason's daughter, Io, 27, is working at a winery in Charlottesville, Va.

Both Donna and Charles were married, briefly, to others before they met. “You don't always pick the right answer the first time,” Donna jokes.

For both of them, their journey together has deepened their appreciation of the concept of *bashert*, or “soulmate.” They appreciate each other for their commonalities and their differences, for the journeys they've shared together, and the paths they have yet to explore.

At Kesser, we have been blessed to be a part of their story, and look forward to the next chapters.

Mazal Tov!