

Viewing Jewish Eldercare from the Other Side of the Bedrail

By Judy D. Ludin, CFRE

My dear sweet mother, Marietta Drucker, passed away peacefully on August 18, 2019, at the age of 91. She lived the last 8 months of her life in the Marion and Bernard Samson Nursing Center, where I have been an employee for 29 years. I really thought I knew everything about Menorah Manor, but when Mom moved here, I realized there were many things I did not know – or fully appreciate.

My mom was a Holocaust survivor. At the age of 10, she was placed on a Kindertransport train by her parents, which took her out of Hitler-ruled Austria into England, where she was housed by foster families.

After the war, she was reunited with her parents, and eventually decided to come to America. She attended a Jewish singles dance with the hopes of meeting a rich American, and she met my dad – also an immigrant from Vienna and a survivor. They married and settled in Michigan, where they built a business and a family. Their joy of life and positive outlook were contagious, and they enjoyed a wonderful life.

After my father passed away, my mother moved into an independent living community and became the “belle of the ball.” She had so many friends. However, she called me one afternoon completely mortified; she accidentally walked into the wrong apartment. She started losing the ability to understand time and wasn’t sure when to go to meals. That is when we decided to transition her into Menorah Manor’s assisted living residence, and shortly afterward she was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. She then moved into Menorah Manor’s Weinman Alzheimer’s Care Village, one floor above my office.

I hate to admit that before she moved to the memory care floor, I avoided this floor like the plague. I found it so upsetting and depressing. Of course, life is full of ironies; this is where Mom landed at the end of her life. I was torn apart seeing her there, even though I knew she would be receiving wonderful care – it was just confirmation for me that things were changing and time with her was growing short.

I quickly realized my preconceptions of her new home were wrong. It actually is full of life, even though she was surrounded by people with Alzheimer’s at the end of their lives. I learned so much about this nursing home that I wouldn’t have learned if Mom had not lived here.

The activity therapists on her floor are specially trained and experienced with working with those with Alzheimer’s. They understand the necessity to be in the moment and to sustain realistic expectations. The staff understands they may not be able to elicit a response from a resident, but they may be able to maintain eye contact or hold someone’s hand – or even better-- encourage a smile or a giggle and that is deemed a success. They use music, aromatherapy, humor and touch. The families that visit daily are a constant source of support for each other.

Thanks to loving staff, my mom looked beautiful every day. For her entire life, Mom was always so fashionable and never left the house without makeup or sparkly earrings. That continued at Menorah Manor; she was dressed nicely every day, complete with lipstick and her favorite blingy earrings. She was content, and she was treated with love and with dignity.

Reflecting on my journey, I must say it is much different to be on the other side of the bedrail. This experience has given me new appreciation for the work we all do as Jewish professionals. I now have a better understanding of how vital it is for all of us to be fully present for those we serve as they may be going through the most stressful time in their lives and demonstrate compassion for their suffering.

This experience has also given me reason to be even more passionate about the need to continue supporting Jewish agencies. We are all aware of the shift in Jewish philanthropy over the last couple of decades. When I began my work at Menorah Manor in 1990, just being Jewish was enough for someone to write a check. That doesn't seem to be enough anymore; Jews are still being philanthropic, but they are spreading their dollars around to many good causes – not all Jewish. That is great, but organizations like Menorah Manor do G-d's work, and we need to ensure they will be here tomorrow to help the Jewish community.

For those of us who work with the Jewish elderly, we are working with families who are facing losing a loved one. We are all so busy with the demands of our jobs, deadlines and other work-related pressures that sometimes we forget the most important thing we can do is to make time to lend an ear or just give a hug to someone who is watching their mother, father, spouse, sibling or friend slip away. Those few minutes of lending support could be the most important thing we do all day.

A couple weeks after my mother passed away, my husband encouraged me to get some fresh air and took me out on our sailboat. As we pulled out of the slip at the marina, we heard a loud thump. Our rudder had broken as a result of a freak accident. Fortunately, nobody was hurt, the boat didn't withstand any damage and we safely made it back into our slip.

A boat cannot steer without a rudder. For my whole life, my mom was my sounding board, always steering me in the right direction. Since her passing, I feel like our sailboat – a rudderless ship. Now I must learn to navigate life without her. As I enter these new waters, I pray that with time I will be able to steer myself into calm and peaceful seas, guided by her loving spirit every inch of the way.

Ludin is the Chief Development & Communications Officer at Menorah Manor in St. Petersburg, Florida. Menorah Manor belongs to the Association on Jewish Aging Services, based in Washington, D.C.