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Connections break elderly out of isolation - Help for Holocaust survivors

By Erica Sherman

The scriptures state that God's first act, after creation, was bringing light into a distinctly dark and chaotic world.

One Brooklyn organization has made it their business to do God's work by bringing light into the lives of what might otherwise be some very dark worlds.

Now celebrating its fifth anniversary, and boasting more than 100 dedicated volunteers, Connect2—a non-profit organization, which offers companionship and support to Holocaust survivors throughout New York City—has helped bring smiles to the hearts of those who live with the memories of the Nazi-led genocide, which happened less than 65 years ago.

Founded nearly two weeks before September 11, 2001, Connect2's Israeli-born Project Director Elisheva (Sheva) Tauby—herself the grandchild of Holocaust survivors—recalls when they first started the program, “It was just a handful of volunteers. I never envisioned it would turn out to be what it is today,” she said.



Survivors were able to spend quality time with the Connect2 volunteers.

Advertisement The seaside communities of Sheepshead Bay, Manhattan Beach, Coney Island, Brighton Beach and Seagate are home to one of the largest segments of Holocaust survivors in the world, and with the seniors inching into their eighties, nineties, and beyond, Tauby understood that in order for these “incredibly strong” members of society to continue leading vibrant, independent lives, they might require a little help.

Assistance, Tauby points out, includes, but is not limited to, help with food shopping and carrying heavy groceries, opening mail, small chores around the house or, it may simply mean having a friend to chat and spend some time with if they're feeling a little lonely.

Funded by a grant from the Conference on Jewish Claims Against Germany, Tauby's impetus to create Connect2—a project of the Jewish Community Council of Greater Coney Island, in collaboration with the Shorefront Jewish Community Council—was twofold: helping the seniors by bridging the generation gap, and pairing up the seniors with younger people, who have a strong desire to “connect with the past.”

If constantly-growing bonds between the survivors and volunteers are any indication, the past five years have been a phenomenal success.

Tauby lauds Connect2's volunteers, praising them as the heart of the program. “They really take care of the seniors like they're their own family—that's the whole point behind Connect2.”

Survivor Celia Goldstein “loves” when her volunteer comes to her house every week. “She became a close friend,” Goldstein smiles. “We talk about her life, and I give her advice on many things like dating and her career choices. It's amazing how even though there is a big age gap, we have so many things in common.”

Most of the partnerships are enormously successful because, as Tauby puts it, “a lot of thought goes into it.” The young, first-time mom meets individually with each survivor and potential volunteer “to see what they're like.”

For instance, Tauby shares, she knew a young man “who loves literature,” and from there “came up with survivor who wrote a couple of books,” and also recalls pairing “someone who speaks Yiddish with someone who is studying linguistics.”

Cutting through bureaucratic red tape, which has become one of Connect2's hallmarks through the years, Tauby said in an interview that sometimes it is the most obvious solutions, which could make all the difference in a senior's life.

“I once had a legally blind survivor living in Manhattan,” she remembers. “I went to visit her and [because of poor eyesight] she could hardly see anything. There were these gigantic phone numbers of people she spoke to plastered on the wall on a massive poster board, because she had to see them, and these poster boards were all over the place.”

Tauby recalls that her client's eyes “were so bad, that I got her an inexpensive speed-dial phone [in which the numbers were easier to read], so now she doesn't have to strain her eyes.”

“Our volunteers ask me if they can pay for things [for the seniors] all the time. They do it because they want to connect with them...they

look at them like a family member.”

And though their eyesight, hearing or reflexes might not be as sharp as they once were, the seniors, Tauby explained to this paper, are by no means helpless, having lived through an era when the strongest and bravest in Europe were reduced to emaciated skeletons.

Longtime volunteer Batsheva Kelmer, a young Orthodox Jewish woman who has been visiting Mrs. Tlumack for more than five years, gains tremendous inspiration from Tlumack, who “survived the war and was in many different camps.”

“She is a person who displays unbelievable strength of character and resolve,” Kelmer shares. “If a person can go through the Holocaust and emerge with strength and positivity [sic] towards the world and life, I can cope with anything God puts in front of me.”

And while, according to the group’s website, volunteers gain enormous satisfaction by seeing how much the survivors appreciate their help and company, Kelmer feels she receives as much, if not more, fulfillment from the bonds she has formed.

“When I first began volunteering I thought I was giving to others, but after I began visiting with survivors I saw I was getting a lot more than giving.”

Kelmer “learned a tremendous amount from the experience” and encourages anyone who is “lucky enough to spend time with a survivor” to volunteer for Connect2.

Among the benefits of Connect2, which both the survivors and volunteers mutually agree, is Tauby’s dedication to the program.

“I love the director, Sheva,” smiles Goldstein. “She is so given over to the program. When she calls me it makes my day.”

If you would like to volunteer for Connect2, or know a survivor who would benefit from its services, call Sheva Tauby at 718-449-5000 extension 216 or visit www.connect2ny.org.

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