

Giving the gift of oneself



JFS spiritual care volunteers provide care and
comfort throughout the year

By Barbara Bayer

Photo by Scott Fishman
Lori and Paul Barnett, shown here in the Minnie & Ira Friedson Garden of Caring at
Menorah Medical Center, volunteer at the hospital one night a week.

Photo by Sarah Reeves
Kathy Keller (left) and Lara
Steinel pour wine and juice,
making it possible for the
Jewish residents at Delmar
Gardens of Overland Park to
say Kiddush at the monthly
Shabbat service.



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any people put a special emphasis on volunteering during the “holiday season.” In the Kansas City Jewish community, a group of 15 dedicated volunteers fulfill the mitzvah of bikkur holim — visiting the sick — every week of the year. These volunteers receive extensive training to work in the health care community serving the spiritual needs of Jewish patients in area hospitals and eldercare centers through the Chaplaincy Program of Jewish Family Services (JFS).

Jewish Community Chaplain Rabbi Jonathan Rudnick said JFS’ cadre of spiritual care volunteers is critical to providing the extensive coverage JFS provides in visiting patients and families regularly at six hospitals and six eldercare centers across town.

“Thanks to each and all of these volunteers, the care and support of our Jewish community is felt by numerous people — such as hospital patients, residents of senior facilities and their families — on a weekly basis. They are a true blessing and the foundation of (the) JFS Chaplaincy Program,” Rabbi Rudnick said.

Lori and Paul Barnett volunteer through JFS at Menorah Medical Center. They learned the importance of spiritual care volunteers when Lori’s mother was

in hospice for 10 months. Lori trained as a hospice volunteer about six months after her mother passed away in 2007. Paul decided to give it a try about a year later.

“We met a lot of volunteers at Hospice House and got to really understand the value of what a volunteer can bring,” Paul explained. “We learned a lot about how to relate to patients by being related to by volunteers.”

Lara Steinel, a member of Congregation Kol Ami and the congregation’s music director, has been singing and leading services for JFS since spring 2016. She first became aware that JFS offered Shabbat programs at Brookdale Leawood “when a beloved member of Kol Ami” became a resident of the independent living community for seniors.

“I accompanied her to the Shabbat service that SueAnn Strom of Beth Torah leads. When I realized that I could be there with my friend, help SueAnn by leading the music and still get to Kol Ami in the early evening to lead the music for our services, I was all in,” Lara said.

She brings along her portable electric keyboard to accompany her when she leads the residents in song and prayer. She sings at Brookdale Leawood the first three weeks of the month, assisting either SueAnn, Kol Ami

Photo by Sarah Reeves

Lara Steinel leads and sings at an erev Shabbat service once a month at Delmar Gardens of Overland Park.



Rabbi Doug Alpert or Rabbi Linda Steigman. On the fourth Friday of the month she leads erev Shabbat services at Delmar Gardens of Overland Park, where she is assisted by JFS spiritual care volunteer Kathy Keller.

Kathy, a member of The Temple, Congregation B'nai Jehudah, is now in her fourth year of volunteering at Delmar Gardens. The time she spends there depends on the week.

"If someone is dying, I might go over more than once a week. If I know someone is in the hospital, I try to also make a hospital visit. If one of the residents dies, I try to go to the funeral. These people are my friends and it is what we do for friends," Kathy noted.

WHY VISIT THE SICK?

Kathy has been a spiritual care volunteer for about four years, and the time she spends at Delmar Gardens is the high point of her week, she said. She chose this type of volunteering because she saw what a difference it made when her family's rabbi visited her father and said the Shema with him, sometimes several times per day, during his final illness.

"It gave him tremendous comfort. (My hometown) Rabbi Jeff Portman is an inspiration to me. I also do this because during my mother's final illness hospice volunteers gave me tremendous support," she said. "I wanted to give back in a similar way."

The people Kathy visits at Delmar Gardens have become her cherished friends.

"I love these people. We have formed a real Jewish community at Delmar. I think that the members of our small Jewish

community truly care about and are supportive of one another. It's quite special to me that I am a part of this," she said.

Lara goes to Brookdale and Delmar Gardens because she believes strongly in the transformative power of Jewish communal prayer.

"If people can't get to Shabbat services, then I want to help bring Shabbat and the beauty of its observance to them. For many, music is the pathway to Jewish prayer. Being able to teach my Brookdale and Delmar Gardens friends new prayers, lead them in singing familiar prayers and celebrate our holidays together through the service and song is so much fun and deeply meaningful to me. I think about our friends there during the week and look forward to seeing them on Fridays," Lara said.

The Barnetts added a weekly shift at Menorah to their volunteer schedule four years ago and within the past few months decided to concentrate their efforts solely on the hospital. Unlike the Shabbat services Lara participates in, the work the Barnetts do at Menorah doesn't necessarily focus on religion as much as it does comfort.

"We don't talk about Torah. We're not rabbis. What we do is a lot of listening, a lot supporting, a lot of empathizing and kindness. That's a lot of what we do. We lend an ear. We have conversations," Paul said.

After devoting time to committee work for many years, Paul said he and Lori did some personal soul searching and decided to switch course to do something a little more hands-on. As Lori explained, they now feel honored to visit with and support a variety of patients, including Holocaust survivors, many people over the age of 90 and even a Righteous Gentile.

Photo by Sarah Reeves
Kathy Keller visits Jewish residents at Delmar Gardens of Overland Park once a week and assists at the monthly erev Shabbat service.



She added that their presence often makes people feel their Jewish roots.

“There are people that haven’t been in a synagogue, that haven’t really been affiliated for years. Our presence makes them think about the Jewish community and that the Jewish community supports them.”

While relationships with hospital patients are usually short-term, they often see and befriend individuals who have multiple hospital stays. One person they forged a relationship with was visiting the area and required a three-week rehab stay. The woman was Jewish, but had been disengaged from the Jewish community.

“When we said goodbye to her at the end she said, ‘I’m going back to California and I’m going to explore my Jewish roots again.’ That was pretty impactful,” Lori said.

In each visit with patients, they try to assess who may need a little extra support, Paul said.

“Then I’ll offer JFS as a resource for finding what their needs may be and how JFS can help fulfill some of their more immediate needs, like transportation or food,” he said.

As a volunteer in the senior living communities, Lara hopes residents who participate in the Shabbat services she leads get a spiritual connection that comes with engagement.

“I also hope that the residents get any or all of the incredible benefits that studies show people gain from active involvement with music, including the music of religious services,” Lara said.

It never fails to move Lara or make her smile when those who gather for services at Brookdale or Delmar Gardens “become a congregation.”

“People offer each other a ‘Shabbat Shalom’ greeting, they catch up on the week’s events, check in to see how someone who was ill is doing, celebrate simchas and make the Shabbat prayers

together. There’s no bimah, no ark, no Ner Tamid, but for that time, we are a congregation.”

Delmar Gardens resident Hal Koffman has been attending the service since it began in January 2017 and enjoys it.

“I get Judaism in my heart without having to go somewhere. It comes to me. I especially liked the opportunity to say Kaddish for my mom,” Hal said.

Another is Patsy Probin, who sings along with all the prayers and throughout the service comments, “That was beautiful.”

Patsy’s sister, Toby Levine, said Patsy loves the service and the time Kathy spends with her on other days.

“Both the service and the Spiritual Care Volunteer Program are wonderful,” Toby said. “Patsy always talks about how much she likes Kathy and being at the service.”

Kathy said another Delmar resident, who is minimally verbal, simply comes alive at the monthly service.

“This particular woman had been unable to participate in Shabbat for over two decades, and because of Lara’s vision, we were able to give that to her. That’s powerful,” Kathy said.

The couple, who are members of B’nai Jehudah, see anywhere from two to 10 patients each Tuesday night. Some visits are half an hour, while some last only five minutes. Most of the time they work as a team, but sometimes they have to “divide and conquer” in order to see everyone on that night’s list.

THE POWER OF CONNECTION

One of the Barnetts’ missions as spiritual care volunteers is to let the patients they visit “know that the Jewish community is there for them.”

“One of the questions we have to ask is if they are affiliated with a congregation and then, of course, if they want their clergy to visit,” Lori said. “But at least 50 percent of our patients are not affiliated. It’s very interesting because the people who are not affiliated are almost afraid to tell us that they are not. We always say to them, ‘We’re not here to judge you. We’re just here from the Jewish community to let you know that the Jewish community is here for you.’”