

A woman with short, wavy grey hair is in the foreground, smiling and looking towards the right. She is wearing a red life vest with black straps and is seated in a yellow kayak, holding a black paddle. Behind her, a man with grey hair and a beard is also in a yellow kayak, wearing a red life vest and holding a paddle. They are on a calm body of water with green trees and mountains in the background.

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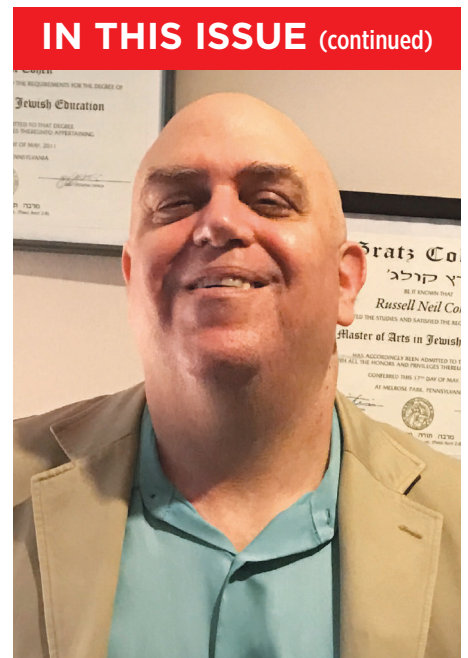
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CELEBRATING A CENTENNIAL *On Canvas*

RACHEL KURLAND | JE STAFF

Bernice Paul doesn't have to go very far to paint a landscape.

In fact, she just steps out into her backyard.

The 100-year-old artist has been painting for almost as long, and finds her inspiration through nature. Dressed in blue jeans, canvas shoes and a pink sweater that matched her glasses, the curly white-haired Paul has an energy as vibrant and youthful as her artwork. Although her vision has deteriorated, making it more difficult to see while painting, that hasn't stopped Paul from pursuing her passion.

She showed about 30 pieces of her art — colorful flowers and lush landscapes — in the Lawrence Gallery at Rosemont College last month, the same month she celebrated her 100th birthday.

Paul was always interested in painting, but it took a long time before she pursued it intently. From there, she didn't know it would consume so much of her life.



Brush: Tarzanova; Background: 649714470/Stock/Thinkstock.com; Paul: Rachel Kurland

“When I came to this country, I said, ‘When I get older, I’m going to draw in an art class.’”

BERNICE PAUL

Growing up in Moscow, one of her teacher’s brothers was an artist, and she always admired his work. But there were few opportunities to practice and learn art techniques.

Although her father was an observant rabbi, her family was liberal and encouraged her passion. Her parents’ friend often brought over crayons and coloring books.

When Paul was a pre-teen, the family of four girls and one boy fled from Soviet Russia and immigrated to Philadelphia during the Great Depression.

“We went in the middle of the night with the help of some friends, and nobody knew anything about it,” she recalled. They escaped on a horse-drawn wagon waiting for them in the dark.

See Canvas, Page 8



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Paul used to work with oils, which she prefers — her favorite artists are Henri Matisse and Georgia O'Keeffe — but now works mainly with acrylic as it's easier to carry outdoors, her favorite place to paint.



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"When I came to this country, I said, 'When I get older, I'm going to draw in an art class,'" Paul added.

At first, learning about art took form solely through observations. Two Italian brothers joined the rest of the immigrants in her English class in 1930. In the winter, she recalled, the brothers drew extravagant designs of Santa Claus or Christmas landscapes on the chalkboard. She was so impressed by their talents that she wanted to learn how to do the same.

During World War II, while her husband was in the army, Paul got a job at a photography studio. She colored black-and-white photographs — this was before colored film — using coloring oils.

But it wasn't until Paul had her only daughter, Susan, that she finally took an art class. She went to Fleisher Art Memorial in South Philadelphia and dropped Susan off for children's classes while she went upstairs for adult classes.

She also studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the Barnes Foundation and the Philadelphia College of Art (now the University of the Arts). Later on, she taught a few classes herself in her own home.

She's since won many prizes for her work; she keeps them in a hefty basket in her basement studio.

Paul used to work with oils, which she prefers — her favorite artists are Henri Matisse and Georgia O'Keeffe — but now works mainly with acrylic as it's easier to carry outdoors, her favorite place to paint.

She often paints the scenery at Haverford College or Fairmont Park, which she can see across the street from her house.

Many of her family members decorate their own homes with Paul's pieces. (Still more adorn Paul's walls.)

Brushes (facing page): ChamilleWhite/Stock/Thinkstock.com
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See Canvas, Page 10

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“My favorite [piece] is what I’m trying to do. Then I’m just all in it. Sometimes I can finish it very fast, and sometimes I leave it alone and come back to it.”

BERNICE PAUL

Canvas

Continued from Page 9

She’s shown her work at several galleries, but the most recent showcase at Rosemont is one of her few solo shows. The preparation was a family affair: Her family helped her buy frames, and her granddaughter and son-in-law also made a few.

“I used to do all these things myself, but now I can’t hit a nail straight,” she laughed.

A lot of her work has sold, too. In recent years, Lankenau Medical Center bought a large mural for its hallways, but she makes sure family comes first.

“Everyone wanted to buy that one,” she said, pointing to another landscape in her studio, “but I said, ‘It’s my daughter’s.’ Naturally, the family goes first.”

One of Paul’s granddaughters lives with her. In the summertime, Paul paints in the backyard, accompanied by a spacious private garden her granddaughter planted full of spinach, mustard greens and lilac.

Inside, Paul’s studio remains in the dimly lit basement of the Overbrook house where she’s lived for more than 50 years.

She walks up and down the basement stairs with ease, leading to an organized

clutter of loose paintbrushes, pastels, watercolors and tubes of acrylic paint.

The room is filled with dozens of canvases — some completed, some works in progress. A couple larger portraits clearly illustrate her two granddaughters.

“My favorite [piece] is what I’m trying to do,” she said. “Then I’m just all in it. Sometimes I can finish it very fast, and sometimes I leave it alone and come back to it.”

Adorning the length of the main wall in the basement is an original advertisement poster from the Philadelphia Museum of Art from 1984, torn at the edges, depicting a 17th-century portrait.

She found it hanging off its pole after kids tore it down, so she brought it home to decorate her studio.

Art adorns all of the walls in her home in one way or another.

“There are so many phases of art. The joy of just creating something,” she paused. “Painting is the most satisfying thing. You lose yourself. A book — you’re over with it.

“There is nothing like painting.” ●

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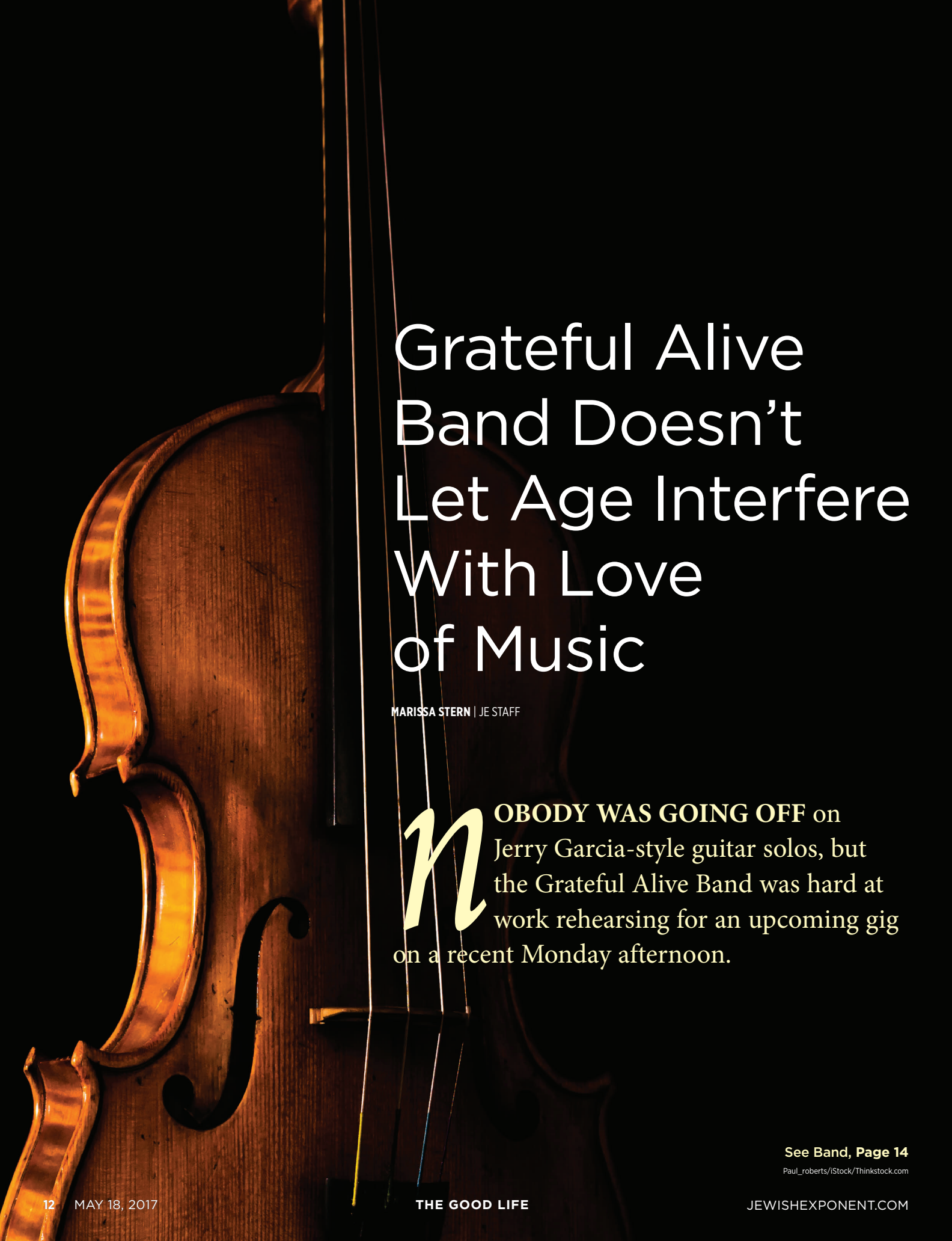
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Grateful Alive Band Doesn't Let Age Interfere With Love of Music

MARISSA STERN | JE STAFF

NOBODY WAS GOING OFF on Jerry Garcia-style guitar solos, but the Grateful Alive Band was hard at work rehearsing for an upcoming gig on a recent Monday afternoon.

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Paul_roberts/iStock/Thinkstock.com

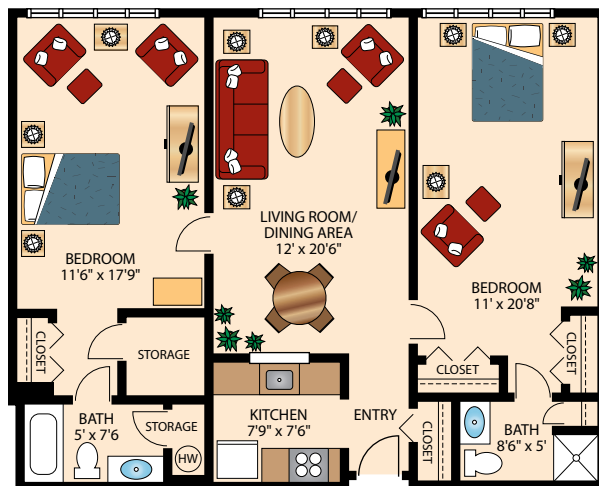
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Band

Continued from Page 12

Swapping “Truckin” and “Friend of the Devil” for tunes like “Tuxedo Junction” and “Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend,” the band of 16 or so senior volunteer musicians practiced in a room at the West Chester Senior Center. Charles “Ozzie” Aldworth sat in the back of the room, watching his keyboardist wife, Mary, lead the band.

Charles Aldworth, the band’s self-proclaimed “roadie,” helped everyone pack up at the end of the rehearsal.

“It’s a good contribution for the community,” he said of the band.

They have a rehearsal or a gig each week and play mostly for senior centers and nursing homes, or travel to places like the Coatesville Veterans Affairs Medical Center. They also recently played for the senior group at Temple Sholom in Broomall.

Nearly every instrument — sans percussion — was present: accordion, violins, saxophone, trumpet, even a standing bass.



The Grateful Alive Band at a rehearsal

As they rehearsed, Mary Aldworth called out encouraging comments, like, “that sounded good,” or, “that was better.”

“It’s a nice group, everybody’s very nice,” Mary Aldworth said. “We have people from all walks of life, different backgrounds.”

There’s a former mayor in the group plus retired teachers — even a rabbi.

“It’s a real joy to be part of this group,” said Rabbi Sue Greenberg, who plays the violin. “I hadn’t played with a group in a while, but when I heard about this group, I decided I needed to join it.”

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Greenberg, a retired chaplain who belongs to Keshet Israel Congregation, has played violin since she was 9 years old.

For her, what the group does expresses a key act of Judaism.

"Aside from having fun oneself, you're doing a mitzvah," she said. "We're performing a mitzvah. It's that simple."

They notice the audience, who may not always be in the best shape, will perk up as the music plays.

"We joke sometimes about some of the audience not being really awake," said Dean Rasmussen, who plays the trumpet, "but when you look around ... you see their toe tapping or something, and it's really gratifying because you know you're making a difference in their day."

"Music does reach parts of the brain that don't normally function, so in some of these facilities it's the only thing that gets them alive again," added violinist Mona Bloom.

Greenberg introduced Chanukah and Passover music to the band's repertoire.

"It's a real kick that while we're enjoying ourselves, we're doing good for somebody else, too," she said. "We're pretty

"It's a real kick that while we're enjoying ourselves we're doing good for somebody else, too. We're pretty upbeat as you can tell from the music, and it's a chance for us and a chance for them; we interact with them. So it gives them joy and it gives us joy."

SUE GREENBERG

See Band, Page 16

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Band

Continued from Page 15

upbeat as you can tell from the music, and it's a chance for us and a chance for them; we interact with them. So it gives them joy and it gives us joy."

Jozef Bobik, 95, is the oldest member of the group. The rest are "young whippersnappers," he said with a laugh.

The violinist joined in as part of the first seven members. Immigrating to America in 1927 from Czechoslovakia, he has played music all his life.

When he was a child, his grandparents asked Bobik if he wanted to learn how to play an instrument.

"I said, 'Yes, trombone,'" Bobik recalled. "So they went out with my father and came home with a violin."

He learned to play by ear and has since picked up the harmonica, piano, clarinet and saxophone. If he can hum a song or sing it, he can play it, he said.

"I don't know how to play the trombone," he laughed. "The one instrument I wanted to learn how to play, I haven't learned how."

"Yet."

Playing with the Grateful Alive gives him a chance to be around people who love music as much as he does.

"It's social. It's camaraderie; you're friends. It gives you a chance to go out and you're doing what you love to do," he said. "If I'm not playing the violin, I'm whistling or singing or humming. ... I enjoy the group, and I would encourage every parent to have their children learn some music. It's the universal language."

Carolyn Barker, 88, joined the original group in the late '80s after a friend wanted her to meet some people.

She went to a coffeehouse and met one of the men who started Grateful Alive.

"When he found out I played the violin, he said, 'You have to come to our rehearsal.' And I said, 'You haven't heard me play yet!'" she laughed. "He said, 'Just come.' So I did, and that's how I got into the group."

The name of the band, she said, came from one of the original violinists, Virginia Love, who died in 2014. ("The name gets everybody," acknowledged saxophonist Tom Chambers with a smile.)

The group has since grown from its original five members, but the value in what they do remains the same.

"I just love the music, and I love the camaraderie of the group. We have a wonderful band, we really do. We have



Rabbi Sue Greenberg and Mary Aldworth

Photo by Marissa Stern

fun,” she said. “I hope that [the audiences] just enjoy the music, the rhythm of the music. We’ve seen it happen where somebody is practically comatose and then when the music starts playing, they get into it. It does revive people — maybe temporarily, but it’s nice. I just hope that they — and I know they do — respond to us.”

For some in the group, like Chambers, the former mayor of West Chester, playing with Grateful Alive gives them a chance to revisit instruments they haven’t played in a long time.

When Chambers, 71, joined about two years ago, it was the first time he picked up the saxophone in 58 years.

After Mary Aldworth “bugged” him for a while to join, he eventually gave in. A former Marine, he especially enjoys being able to play for the VA hospital they frequently visit.

“Being able to see the satisfaction you get out of watching people react to the music is just wonderful, and that’s why I like to do it,” he said.

For other band members, the group allows them to play an instrument they had wanted to for a long time.

“I told my husband [for] 50 years, ‘Someday I’m going to play the accordion.’ Now that I’m this age and try to carry it around, it ought to be a piccolo,” laughed Judy Wadsworth, 79.

She and Greenberg stood together after rehearsal was finished and reflected that sometimes the performances are emotional. They finish each gig with songs for the armed forces, always ending with “God Bless America.”

The group has a good time doing what they do, Greenberg added.

“[The audiences] relate to us because we’re about the same age,” she laughed.

Wadsworth pointed to their dedication to play.

“People don’t miss it if they can make it,” she said. “You don’t stay home from Grateful Alive. It takes something important to keep us away because it’s a big part of our lives.” ●

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Left: Anthony Jenkins doesn't let age get in his way.

Above: Boomers (and a stray teen) in action

Exercising Boomer Style

ANDY GOTLIEB | JE MANAGING EDITOR

Much to my chagrin, I learned recently that I am an *alterkaker*.

I was at the Kaiserman JCC taking the twice-weekly Boomer Bootcamp class, when I began my usual exaggerated grumbling about a particularly disliked exercise. My role is class clown, or maybe class idiot, depending upon who you ask.

Instructor Jernell Mapp, who knows to not take my protests seriously, pointed out that since I'm the youngest person in the class, I shouldn't have any problem completing the exercise.

I glanced around in mock shock, then slowly realized she was right about the age part.

"Nobody here is younger than 50?" I asked incredulously, met only with heads shaking "no."

So even though I'm not technically a boomer — baby boomers were born between 1946 and 1964, while I was born in 1966 — my participation does make me an *alterkaker*.

That said, I'm glad I'm an *alterkaker* because Boomer Bootcamp has become a community on to itself. A community of *alterkakers*, but a good community nonetheless. As they (who is "they," anyway?) say, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

So that's what I've done.

For an hour at 6 p.m. every Monday and Wednesday, Mapp puts a group of 12 to 20 participants (and growing) through its paces.



Photos by Andy Gottlieb; Weights: adavino/iStock/Thinkstock.com

To a mostly Motown soundtrack, with some '50s oldies and '70s disco mixed in, we warm up with assorted stretches. From there, it's on to an ever-changing mix of arm curls, jumping jacks, pushups, head bangers, lunges, squats and planks, and, if Mapp is feeling particularly evil, mountain climbers and burpees. (Anyone who's ever done one knows that the only thing worse than burpees is herpes.)

After a few minutes of core exercises — including the dreaded toe touches while lying on our backs with legs in the air (a favorite of mine since they hurt my neck *and* my back!) — we wrap up with a couple balance exercises and a few more stretches.

I try not to look in the mirror at myself because I envision I resemble Frankenstein trying to exercise and am usually completely out of sync with everyone else.

One reason the class is so popular is that it works for varying levels of fitness. Mapp offers alternative, less-rigorous versions of exercises for those with assorted physical ailments. That might include doing an exercise while seated or holding onto a chair; it might also be involve trying the exercise without weights.

See Boomer, Page 20

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Boomer

Continued from Page 19

Mapp, 49, has a track and field background — she helped officiate the women's javelin throw at the recent Penn Relays — and coaches the Friends' Central indoor and outdoor cross-country teams, in addition to her duties as assistant fitness director. Under her tutelage the last couple years, the class has morphed from one originally designed for aging basketball players — that would be me — to a program for anyone from 50 to 70 looking to improve their overall fitness.

"This relieves tension, keeps me fit, keeps me flexible and I'm hoping that it counters the effects of aging," said importer Simon Saionz, 66, of Wynnewood, who regularly attends the classes with his wife, Lynne, and has the usual privilege of occupying the space next to me. "It's challenging, and I generally don't do these types of exercises on my own."

Other participants offered similar sentiments, then noted that something else may be even more important.



Top left: Jernell Mapp

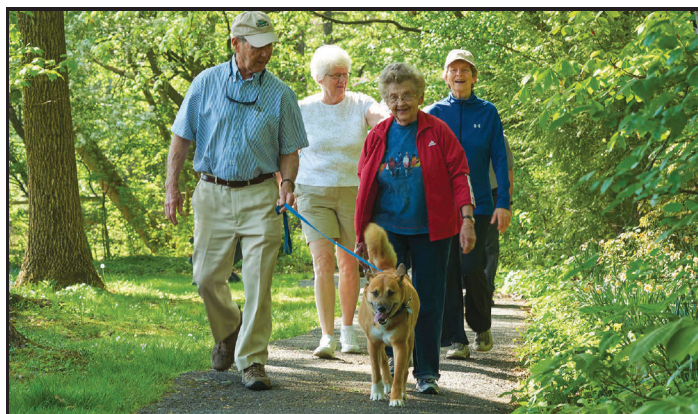
Right: Simon Saionz



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See Boomer, Page 22

Bottom: Bill Rosenbaum and Patty Rettig



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Boomer

Continued from Page 20

"The fact that we are a group and act as a team — what that has generated as a class is camaraderie," said Anthony Jenkins, 56, a pastor, behavior specialist consultant and former Marine who is Mapp's de facto second-in-command and gives me false hope by saying my pot belly is diminishing. "There is a camaraderie among a diversity of people."

"It's like a 45-minute social network. It brings the community together," Mapp said, citing the age, gender, racial and religious mix of participants. "In a Jewish community center, you have a beautiful melting pot."

Patty Rettig, 59, whose sister, Susie Rettig, also is in the class, put it more simply.

"I just look forward to Monday and Wednesday night," said the pediatric nurse practitioner, who tended to me the time I cramped up and made a fool out of myself rushing from the room.

That said, the class is about exercising — and people are seeing results.

"I see all the regulars getting strong and fit," Patty Rettig said.

At 70, retiree Bill Rosenbaum is among the oldest participants. He said the class gives him more energy.

"It makes me motivated to come, although I might not want to do so," he said. "I'm kind of surprised I can do everything pretty easily."

Rosenbaum's also the most enthusiastic participant about the music and is willing to bust out a dance move or two if coaxed. You might think the music's a small point, but Mapp takes pains to come up with playlists that motivate.

"I get to know their personalities through music," she said.

Sometimes, however, that can backfire, such as the time Mapp demonstrated — to the sounds of Hall & Oates — a new exercise that didn't seem appealing.

My simple response of "I can't go for that" got a good laugh and temporarily derailed things, even if we still had to do the exercise.

Mapp expects the class to continue to evolve as she fine-tunes things according to the group's needs.

"The greatest success is you keep coming back," she said, failing to note that an even greater success would be for me to keep coming back and stop grumbling — a far more difficult result to achieve. ●

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Ramblin' Man and Stroke Victim Russ Cohen NOW WALKING TALL

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BUT UNLIKE MANY in his situation, Russ Cohen never gave up.

Confined to a wheelchair following a 2013 stroke on his right side, he finally stopped feeling sorry for himself after the loss of a close friend and decided to get up — literally — and do something. So he started volunteering at area nursing homes.

And while the wheelchair still sits in his cramped apartment at the Elkins Park House as a reminder, for the most part he's walking.

He wants those facing some of the same issues to not feel quite so alone.

"I was depressed," said the 54-year-old Cohen, whose situation came to the attention of the JEVS Human Services Nursing Home Transition program about three months after his stroke. JEVS has been at his side since, now helping him adjust through its Supports Coordination program. "I wasn't in denial.

See Cohen, Page 24



CALL 911 IMMEDIATELY

Cohen

Continued from Page 23

"I couldn't move. They carried me on a gurney. I was very unhappy. I just wanted to die."

The stroke occurred when Cohen was on his way to work at York Nursing and Rehabilitation Center. The receptionist noticed he was sweating and seemed out of sorts, and immediately called for an ambulance. Once admitted to the hospital, Cohen, who admits he wasn't taking care of himself then, fought his caretakers at every turn.

"I thought I had a fever," said Cohen, who was a heavy smoker and had issues with bulimia and anorexia. "I went to Einstein for four days and got kicked out because I refused treatment."

"I tried to hide it from my parents for a couple of days because my dad had had a stroke a few years before."

Eventually, he realized the problem was far more serious than he imagined. Over the course of the next year, Cohen began his recovery, living at Majestic Oaks Rehabilitation and Nursing Center in Warminster while rehabbing at Moss-Rehab in Elkins Park.

But he still felt like an outsider, which in some ways made him feel strangely comfortable. After all, Cohen had always been different.

"Russell always marched to his own drummer," said his mother, Ellen Cohen, who indicated her son was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) when he was in first grade. "He had a handicap growing up, but not a lot was available in terms of education."

"He was never on any medication, but he was very bright and his memorization skills were amazing."

They encountered so much resistance sending their son to Hebrew school that the Cohens left Northeast Philadelphia for

the Jersey shore.

"Getting Bar Mitzvahed for me was difficult because I was rejected by the Philadelphia synagogues at the time, because of my learning disability," said Cohen, who would later return to attend Lower Moreland High School and the Ashbourne School. "Rabbis then did not know how to deal with this."

"But we had a house in Longport from before. We went to the rabbi in Margate at Temple Emeth Sholom [Reform Congregation], Rabbi Seymour Rosen. He said, 'Sure I'll take him.' Because of him, I got into biblical history. He gave me more than a Bar Mitzvah. He was a rabbi of the heart."

Meanwhile, Cohen kept showing up people who told him he couldn't achieve things.

"They told my parents, 'Accept his limitations. He won't go to college,'" he said, bitterly recalling his time at Ashbourne.

See Cohen, Page 26



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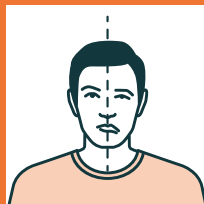
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Cohen

Continued from Page 24

"That's right. I didn't go to college. I went to graduate school."

In 1985, Cohen graduated from Bradford College in Haverhill, Mass., with a degree in creative arts. After working briefly for a Huntingdon Valley company, he switched over to the mental health field, working for agencies in Germantown and Mount Airy before moving back to the shore to take a position at Oceanside Convalescent Center. That evolved into a job at Seashore Gardens Living Center, a Jewish agency in Galloway Township.

"It was always about helping people," explained Cohen, who recently led the seder at The Chelsea at Jenkintown, a nursing home. "It was never about making money or having money."

"But the reason I moved back here was because I got accepted into graduate school at Gratz in 2007. I got my master's in Jewish studies in 2010. I wasn't after a career. I just wanted it. Then I decided to get some graduate certificates."

Of the event that sent him careening for a time, he was philosophical.

"Anybody can get a stroke," he warned. "You don't have to be a certain age. It knows no bounds."

The effects of the stroke left him as much emotionally as physically damaged.

"The one thing I did was volunteer," said Cohen, who volunteers at Moss three days a week and Chelsea twice a week and, whenever he can, tries to get over to Gratz. "I ran the interfaith services and got very close to some of the residents there."

He also became friends with a woman who worked at Gratz named Lenore Bryant; she died in December 2015.

"She had set me up with Ellen Goldberg, who manages the volunteers at Moss," said Cohen, who never married or had children. "After Lenore died, [Goldberg] said, 'Why don't you volunteer at Moss?'"

"Now I go into patients' rooms. I pick up their spirits. I hear their stories. I do things I never had done for me. And what I like about the place is I don't have to hide anything there. I can be me."

For all the progress Cohen has made, he still requires daily care from JEVs, which includes help with his bathing, dressing, eating (he receives Meals on

Wheels) and other basic functions most take for granted.

"We so often see people in this position just quit," said JEVs publicist Justin Windheim. "They figure, 'This is my life. This is how I'm going to be.'"

Cohen has those moments, too.

"There are still days when I wake up and, for about a minute and a half when I think about all the stuff I have to deal [with], I think, 'I don't want to be here anymore,'" he said. "Then I say, 'OK, enough of that.' Now I'm ready to go."

Those who know him best find his progress hard to believe.

"I never would've expected him to be where he is now," said his younger brother, Jonathan. "If you'd seen him in the hospital you would've shaken your head. Even a year ago I'm surprised how far he's come."

So is his mother.

"I'm so proud of him," Ellen Cohen said. "The fact [that] Russell has accomplished what he has is amazing. He was always striving for independence, and now he's got it. It gives him a feeling of success." ●

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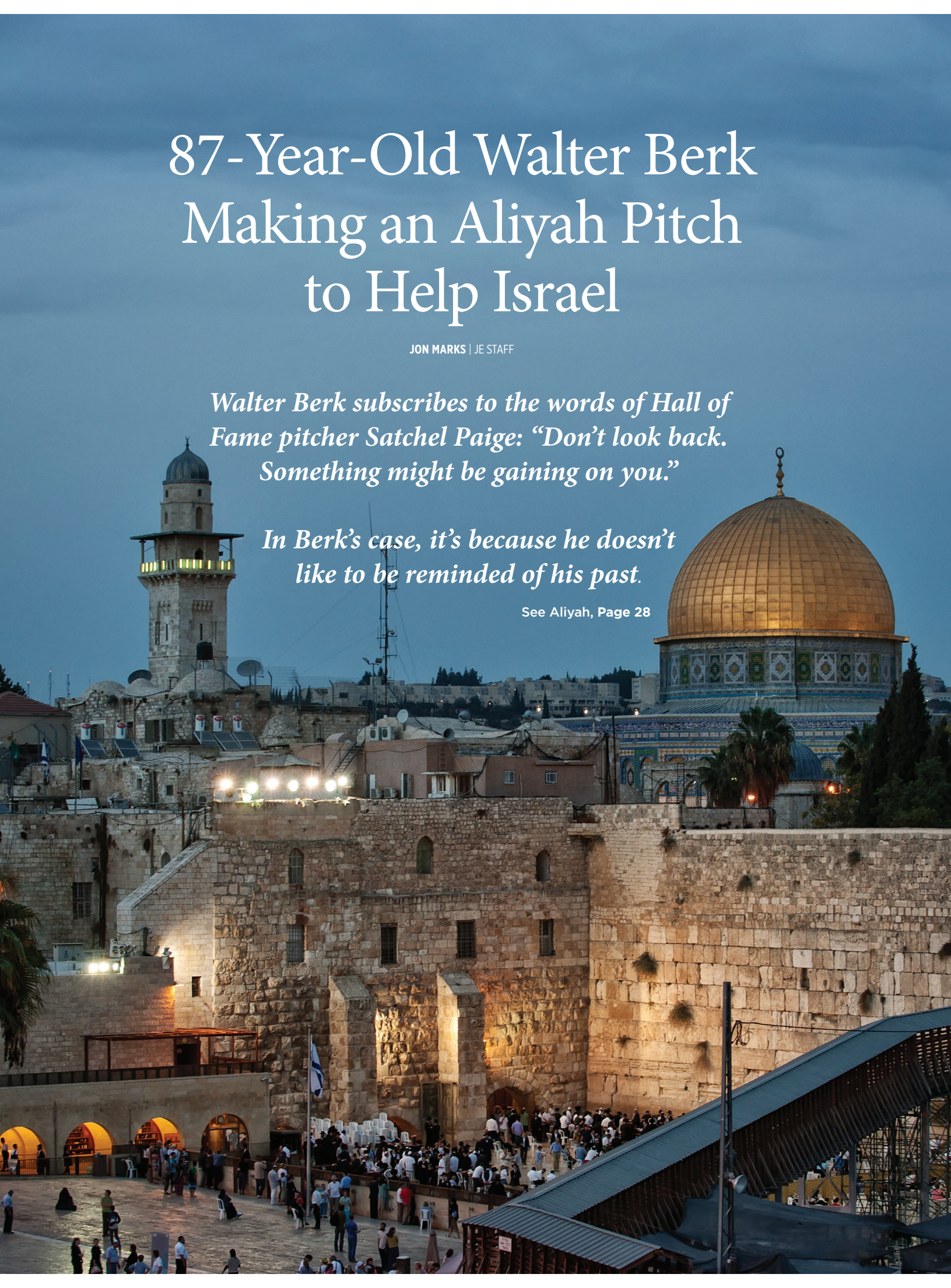
87-Year-Old Walter Berk Making an Aliyah Pitch to Help Israel

JON MARKS | JE STAFF

Walter Berk subscribes to the words of Hall of Fame pitcher Satchel Paige: “Don’t look back. Something might be gaining on you.”

In Berk’s case, it’s because he doesn’t like to be reminded of his past.

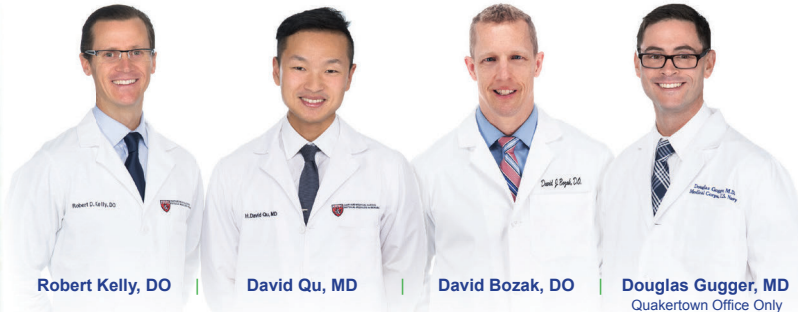
See Aliyah, Page 28



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Walter Berk and his granddaughter, Alyssa

Aliyah

Continued from Page 27

NOT WHEN YOU consider he was a 5-year-old orphan in a foster home, finding himself without a family at a time people were just starting to recover from the Great Depression.

Not when he survived that to join the military, training men whose mission was to go to Korea to fight in a war that was never declared.

Not when he went on to live a normal life and raise a family until his wife of 47 years, Eleanor, died in 2005.

Therefore, instead of looking back, he's looking ahead — only not too far.

After all, Berk is 87 but still going strong.

He's believed to be among the oldest to ever make *aliyah*, having moved to Israel in late March. That enables him to be near his son, Allen, and eight of his 15 grandchildren.

But that's only partially why he did it.

The real reason is because he feels he has a purpose in Israel. In Langhorne, where he was spending time with Sheila Weiss, whom he met after Eleanor's death while both were volunteering, that wasn't so much the case.

But with Sar-El, the 35-year-old National Project for Volunteers for Israel, Berk found a way to not only keep himself occupied but to do something meaningful.

Now his mission is to convince others in the United States to join him.

"I decided to come here and help out," said Berk, who first got involved with Sar-El more than a decade ago and had visited for a few weeks regularly since then before deciding to make it permanent. "And they need a lot of help here."

"I pack medical supplies. Whenever there's a disaster in Haiti or Nepal or

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someplace, they send supplies over. The supplies get used up, so they have to be repacked, of course."

Just as Berk used to have a job as an electrical contractor in New York City before retiring a few years ago, now he's found this. But he wants company.

"We need help," said the Brooklyn native, who'll periodically cross the Atlantic to spend time with Weiss and visit his sons, David and Lenny, in North Jersey. "They get people from France and other countries, but they seem to have a shortage of Jewish people.

"Instead of taking that trip to Florida for a couple of months, you should come over here. After I stopped working and my wife died, I wondered, 'What am I going to do? Where am I needed?'"

"When I came to Sar-El, I thought, 'I'm needed here.' Since I'm needed here, I decided I'm coming here."

It makes sense when you factor in his commitment, coupled with the family ties he already has.

"He feels a very deep connection and feels he's doing something worthwhile for Israel," Weiss said. "I give him lot of credit.

"He's a worker. He doesn't like to sit still. But he doesn't want to just work. He wants to work for Israel."

And after Berk finishes his current visit to the States, Weiss will accompany him in Israel for a few months.

"We're unskilled labor, taking the place of soldiers so they can do what they do," the 81-year-old Weiss said. "We feel good about it. He says it was *besht* we met when we did because I wasn't looking for anybody and I'm sure he wasn't after losing his wife."

She said it's far too early to decide whether she'll ever make *aliyah* herself, but commends Nefesh b'Nefesh for making Berk's transition so smooth.

"Nefesh B'Nefesh got me here and gave me a terrific job," Berk said. "They're always asking me what kind of help do I need.

"The last few weeks, they helped me get all my papers straightened out. The whole operation's gone very smoothly."

That was seldom the case for Berk during his childhood.

"I remember very little of my past," said Berk, who grew up being shuttled around by a foster care association in New York before going to a family whose religious beliefs were "as close to Communism as you can get."

"But I have the type of past I'm not really interested in remembering. All I can think about is tomorrow. That sort of leads to why I'm in Israel now."

He said whether you're Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Orthodox or even secular, it doesn't really matter.

"My wife was Orthodox, so we went to Rockwood Park Jewish Center," he recalled, "but I just consider myself Jewish.

"Judaism is a great religion. You can pick whatever you want to be. I hate people who want put you in a box. Just be part of the community and enjoy life."

Berk's doing precisely that.

"They've fixed up the beach here better than it was," said Berk, who lives in the Tel Aviv suburb of Tel HaShomer. "They've got exercise equipment and people flying kites on the water and in sailboats.

"I miss America. No question, it's a great place. But I always said to my kids, 'Make your own decisions and do what you think is best. And be helpful.'"

Clearly, Berk has practiced what he preached. And each time he goes to the Sar-El base in Matzrap that gets reinforced.

"Working on an army base, what can be better?" he asked. "They get me up around 7 a.m. Give us food. Give us a bed. It's an excellent program. But we need help." •

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