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# ‘I’m a Very Lucky Lady’

*CEO Reflects on Life*

SELAH MAYA ZIGHELBOIM | JE STAFF

**W**hen Golden Slipper Gems needed to stuff and mail 1,000 envelopes, 82-year-old Merle Holman was one of the first to volunteer.

Holman, who still works part time as the CEO of her company Group Dynamics In Focus, never says no, said Golden Slipper Gems Executive Director Marcia Garrell. When something needs to get done, Holman just does it.

“She’s really an example of how one should live when you are older,” Garrell said. “She is very interested in doing new things. She’s a joiner. As you get older, you need to sometimes be more flexible because your body hurts or you’re having trouble with a hand. She’s somebody who’s able to get over those bumps and keep on going with the things that excite her about her life. Every time I talk to her, she is doing something new.”

Holman is an active volunteer with and board member of Golden Slipper and Act II Playhouse. Once a week, she also comes into work at Group Dynamics, which she founded in 1981.

“I’ve gotten through a lot,” Holman said. “I’m so fortunate to be doing all of this.”





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DOING SOMETHING NEW.**

MARCIA GARRELL

She was born and raised in West Philadelphia and Lower Merion. Her family belonged to Adath Israel until they, along with a group of other families, broke away and founded Main Line Reform Temple. Holman attended Lower Merion High School. Her father ran a newspaper for Brith Sholom Lodge, and her mother was involved with Hadassah and American Jewish Congress, so volunteering was a big part of her upbringing.

She continued on to Harcum College, where she studied marketing, advertising and public relations, and was one of three students in her major. A year after graduation in 1957, she got married.

Life took a turn in 1964.

Holman got divorced, and she found herself a single mother of two young children.

No one in her family could fathom that she would be able to support herself and her children on her own. Her mother was a homemaker and told her she needed to get remarried soon.

But she managed and, eventually, thrived.

SEE CEO | Page 8



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“My grandmother had come over from Russia and gotten divorced and raised three children,” Holman said. “I very much feel that she is my spirit, my living spirit. She’s gotten me through a lot of it. She can do it. I can do it.”

Holman started working for a marketing research company, a new field at the time. She wrote questionnaires, did phone interviews, recruited people for focus groups and more. Then in 1971, she started a company at home called Merle Holman Interviewing Service, which grew to about 180 employees.

In 1971, she also met a man named Alex Bruckner. The two never lived together, Holman said, but they shared 30 years of good times until he was diagnosed with lung cancer and died in 2001.

After running her own business for seven years, Holman decided she didn’t like working from home anymore and went to work for a company in Center City.

One day, she came in and discovered she had been laid off, so in 1981, she began working for herself once again. She started another company, Group Dynamics In Focus.

She faced challenges that many today wouldn’t even consider. She didn’t have the credit to take out a loan from a bank, and said the Small Business Administration (SBA) rejected her because she was a woman. In the end, her father and Bruckner helped her with funding.

Holman opened a focus group facility. It was groundbreaking work. Not a lot of other people were doing focus groups, and it was the first such facility in Bala Cynwyd, she said. Bruckner set



Merle Holman volunteers at the reception desk for Golden Slipper Gems.

Holman photos provided

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her office up with some computers. She would invite people for a focus group into a hotel room or into a home, while the client sat in a different room and watched on a television.

Thirty-seven years later, the company is still going.

"I attribute my life to having decent health, friends and just following my own path because I had to," Holman said. "It's just luck."

Four or five years ago, Holman's role at the company began to change. As her volunteer work began to take up more time, she stepped back in her company role. Daughter Robin Kaplan now runs it and serves as president.

Inspired by her mother, Kaplan also started volunteering about a year ago with the Philadelphia Ronald McDonald House.

"I saw how much she enjoyed it, how much she loved it, and decided it was time for me to start being able to give back a little bit," Kaplan said. "It gets passed down. We all lead by her example. We've all been very fortunate to have her here for all this time and learn from what she has done."

Kaplan's been involved in the company since its beginning, she said. Over the decades, the company has expanded in physical size, as well as scope. It now interviews and surveys people across the country.

"It was time," Holman said. "She had put her time in, and I was getting involved in a lot of nonprofits, which I've always been involved in, but this was taking a lot more time."

Over the years, she had gotten involved in Linda Creed Breast Cancer Foundation, the Cancer Support Community, as well as Act II Playhouse and Golden Slipper.

She volunteers at Golden Slipper Gems at Adath Israel on

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*Martin, resident, catches up with Nataiya,  
Lifestyle & Leisure team member*

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## CEO

Continued from Page 9

Wednesdays. She walks out of there, she said, feeling good about the work she does. It was almost selfish.

"I'm so blessed that I have this opportunity to work with the seniors, which

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TO HAVING  
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AND JUST  
FOLLOWING MY  
OWN PATH.**

MERLE HOLMAN



is Golden Slipper Gems, and on the board, and get to the camp once a year in the summer," Holman said. "It's just phenomenal. We've done some really good work, and there's just so much to be done."

Not long ago, Holman was asked to speak to a group of women about her life story and to inspire them as a mentor figure. About 50 women attended.

"I'm so proud of being me and the fact that people want to hear about my experience," Holman said. "I'm a very lucky lady. That gets a lot of exclamation points." ●

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# Broadcaster Keeps a Lifelong Promise to Ol' Blue Eyes

BY HILARY DANAILOVA

Sid Mark had never held a golf club or driven a convertible. But growing up in 1940s Camden, N.J., he was convinced that his ticket to that glamorous lifestyle was a career in broadcasting.

"You wear a beautiful suit, you go play golf and then you get in your beautiful car and you hang out all night with beautiful ladies," explained Mark. "I thought that's what radio was."





▲ Sid Mark

PHOTOS PROVIDED

Now 85 and an honoree in the Philadelphia Broadcast Pioneers Hall of Fame, he knows better.

So did Mark's parents, who had other ideas for their son, born Sidney Mark Fliegelman. Strictly Orthodox Jews, they expected him to follow his father and uncles into the family clothing business and become a pillar of the synagogue where "my dad had the first row, first seat," Mark recalled.

The would-be retailer ended up with a different kind of front row seat — to the career of Frank Sinatra, whose music he has championed for decades as host of "Sounds of Sinatra," one of the longest-running broadcasts in radio history. Mark's WPHT 1210 AM program, a staple of the Philadelphia airwaves since 1957, is nationally syndicated on 100 stations.

And although Sinatra has been dead for 20 years, his popularity endures. Mark still gets at least 100 emails a week, "and they all start off the same way: 'I started listening on Sunday mornings, while Mom and Dad were making gravy,'" he said. The Villanova resident loves relating how in the 1970s, Mayor Frank Rizzo complained that the power dipped across Philadelphia as radios switched on to hear Mark's show.

Podcasts and satellite have transformed the business, but Mark eschews digital conveniences, preferring to play each recording himself. "It gives me a warmer feeling; I can set the mood better," said the AM veteran. "Everything I play is for a reason."

That reason is Sinatra, who Mark has been playing his way for more than six decades. "I haven't been on vacation for 20 years, because I don't want anyone else doing the show," he admitted. "It's like someone dating your girl. I tell my wife" — Judy, with whom Mark shares a 45-year marriage and four grown children — "that I've been having an affair all this time ... with the show."

SEE SID MARK | Page 14



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## SID MARK

Continued from Page 13



In 62 years, Mark's only absence was a two-week hiatus for heart surgery, and he dismisses talk of retirement. "I promised Frank I'd do it as long as I could," explained Mark, a longtime confidant of both Ol' Blue Eyes and the late Frank Sinatra Jr. "It's been a good ride. How blessed am I? It could have been any other performer ... but it was Frank."

Lucky indeed, because it's hard to imagine a show with similar longevity built around Oscar Peterson, Sarah Vaughan or any of the other bygone legends Mark worked with as a young jazz enthusiast.

Indeed, Mark's radio career was built on notable persistence. He'd hoped to join Armed Forces Radio by enlisting for the Korean War after high school, but spent two years in the infantry instead. A two-year broadcasting course got him no closer to a radio dial. Finally, Mark got a break when his sister's out-of-town jazz teacher asked Mark where to find a good Jewish meal nearby.

The younger man took the teacher home to sample Mrs. Fliegelman's cooking, and "when he took the second bowl of vegetable soup with short ribs in it, I knew I was fine forever," Mark chuckled. He started hanging around the teacher's radio station, which led to hosting a live broadcast of the Saturday jazz show at the Red Hill Inn in Pennsauken, N.J.

"My first band was Stan Getz — he was a Philadelphian as well," said Mark. For the next few years, the novice handled such luminaries as Count Basie and Duke Ellington. One singer, though, eluded the Red Hill Inn: Frank Sinatra, whom Mark discovered

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through his sister. “She’d send me to the record store to buy 78s,” Mark remembered. “It was kind of embarrassing for a teenage boy to be buying Frank at the time, with all the girls screaming.”

But one winter, Mark was alone in a California military barracks. “Frank came on singing ‘I’ll Be Home For Christmas,’ and I said, ‘My God, listen to that.’ There was nothing like it!”

By the mid-1950s, Mark was hosting an all-night broadcast on WHAT in Philly. One evening, instead of the rock ‘n’ roll his producers wanted, Mark decided to play Sinatra’s new album in its entirety. The next day, sales of the album spiked around Philadelphia. That finally got the attention of Sinatra’s agent; the next thing he knew, Mark was invited to spend a weekend with the icon in Las Vegas.

As their friendship blossomed, “Sounds of Sinatra” became a radio destination for listeners who prized their host’s insider knowledge. Philadelphia was a passionate fan base for Sinatra, said Mark, who frequented the singer’s Manhattan apartment. “He’d always joke: Are you sure you’re Jewish? Because I hear the way you say marinara,” Mark laughed.

While Mark was the less religious of the two, both men shared a deep respect for family and Jewish tradition, which Sinatra saw as akin to his own Italian culture. “Frank was the most charita-

**“I promised Frank I’d do it as long as I could. It’s been a good ride. How blessed am I?”**

**SID MARK**



ble man ever, and a tremendous supporter of the state of Israel,” Mark noted.

The hard-living singer also gave the radio host advice on dealing with laryngitis. “He’d say, ‘Your problem is you don’t drink enough,’” Mark recalled. (The broadcaster relies on tea, lozenges and an evening schedule.)

Photographs show the craggy, 6-foot-4-inch Mark towering over the singer, smiles intact as their hair whitens over the years. “He’s been a friend for as long as I’ve been in this business,” Sinatra told a crowd in 1991. “It’s wonderful to have a friend like Sidney, and I’ve had maybe four or five in my career. People who’ve stayed with me when things were dark, who didn’t change when everything else changed.”

You might say the same of Sinatra’s own fans, for whom the Chairman of the Board remains as alluring as ever. “He’s intergenerational,” noted Mark. Annual Sinatra tribute concerts sell out; millennials regularly host Rat Pack theme nights.

That’s because, as Mark observed, glamour is eternal. “And that was Frank,” he said. “All the guys wanted to be like him, and all the women wanted to date him. Sinatra is the convertible and the girls and the golf clubs. Sinatra is a lifestyle.” •

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# Lifelong Educator Teaching Judaism at 90

SELAH MAYA ZIGHELBOIM | JE STAFF

**I**t's been 15 years since Sara Cohen retired from her position as educational director at Har Zion Temple, but her love of teaching and Judaism keeps the 90-year-old educator coming back.

Once a week, she leads an adult *tefillah* class, where she and her students delve into Jewish prayer — the meaning behind the words, who wrote them and why.

"I just love teaching," said Cohen, who has lived in the same Wynnewood home for decades. "The mitzvah, the commandment, is to learn, but it's also to learn and to teach."

Cohen was born and raised in Brooklyn, N.Y. Her zayde taught her to love Judaism, she said. He was *shomer* Shabbat and would often spend Shabbat with her family. She remembers walking with him to shul.

Her parents were not particularly religious, and, she said, they ended up



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▲ Sara Cohen teaches a class at Har Zion.

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**“I believe that our children should really learn and know our traditions, and therefore, they would appreciate it.”**

finding Judaism through her.

Cohen wanted to attend Hebrew school, but her mother felt like Sunday school was enough for a girl. Her father agreed to it, and she started a more serious Jewish education later than her peers at 10 years old. She finished when she was in high school and did extra learning in the summer so she could catch up for Hebrew high school.

“Jewish education was education as it should be,” Cohen said. “There was a lot of learning, serious learning. I believe that our children should really learn and know our traditions, and therefore, they would appreciate it, which they did.”

Her father was first violist in the CBS Symphony Orchestra. One day while at the recording studio, he met a young serviceman named Irving Cohen who was in the army band. Her father told

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## TEACHER

Continued from Page 17

Cohen to say hello to his wife, who worked as a senior hostess at the USO Center Fort Hamilton, where Irving Cohen was based.

Sara Cohen ended up meeting Irving through her parents. She was 16 years old, and he was 20. They married a few years later when his military service ended.

She went to Brooklyn College, where she studied Hebrew and Hebrew education. She also attended seminary school.

"I hit it from two angles because I didn't have it at home," Cohen said, "and I was up against a lot of kids that went to yeshiva and day school, and I didn't go to that. My parents just didn't have the money or the desire to send me to a day school. I did it all in the afternoon school, and that's why I was so passionate about it, because it can be done and it should be done."

Irving Cohen was also a teacher, in the field of music. He had a Ph.D. in music from New York University and spent some time teaching at Yeshiva University.

After 20 years of married life in Brooklyn, Irving Cohen got a job as a professor of music history at West Chester University, which brought the couple to Philadelphia in 1970.

They bought a house in Wynnewood, and Sara Cohen started teaching at Solomon Schechter Day School and eventually became a principal.

In 1978, Har Zion's Rabbi Gerald Wolpe called and invited her to come serve as educational director at Har Zion. She stayed for 25 years.

"We had the numbers," Cohen said, in reference to how the



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## “I love children and I love my Judaism and I just put it together.”

religious school had more than 450 students in the afternoon program at one point, in addition to a preschool. “We had a top school. The people who came to us believed in public school for their secular education, and they wanted their Hebrew school religious training for their children to be [as] good as the secular schools, and we made it that way.”

One thing that solidified the school’s status was her decision to get the school accredited by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism’s (USCJ) department of education, an uncommon move at the time.

She also became part of a national commission on Jewish education, and she headed to New York a few times a year to advocate. She was also on the publications committee of USCJ.

“I love children and I love my Judaism and I just put it together,” Cohen said. “I was very lucky. I had a wonderful staff.”

Some of the staff she brought on still work at Har Zion.

One is Norman Einhorn, director of member engagement. She hired him 32 years ago to work as a teacher soon after he

SEE TEACHER | Page 20



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## TEACHER

Continued from Page 19

**“My greatest pleasure today is going to Har Zion as a congregant, having retired from there, and seeing former graduates from our school.”**

graduated college. Einhorn said the relationships he has, such as with Cohen, have kept him at Har Zion.

“She’s served as a grandmother to my children and a mother to me,” Einhorn said. “She’s incredible. She’s the Energizer Bunny of Har Zion.”

In 1989, Irving Cohen became ill and died. West Chester still holds an annual concert in his memory.

“We had a wonderful marriage,” Sara Cohen said. “Unfortunately, it wasn’t long enough.”

In 2003, Cohen retired. She started working at Arcum and Rosemont colleges, where she taught the Holocaust and women in the Old Testament.

Health issues put her on pause for a while, and when she recovered, she taught at Temple Beth Hillel-Beth El and Adath Israel. She also decided to return to teaching at Har Zion.

Sometimes, she finds herself teaching the same students she knew as children, and she sees them coming to Har Zion with their own children.

“My greatest pleasure today is going to Har Zion as a congregant, having retired from there, and seeing former graduates from our school ... come back with their children who are active with their youth groups and their Hebrew schools today,” Cohen said. “[I’m] sort of the grandmother of all of them. It’s a good feeling.” •

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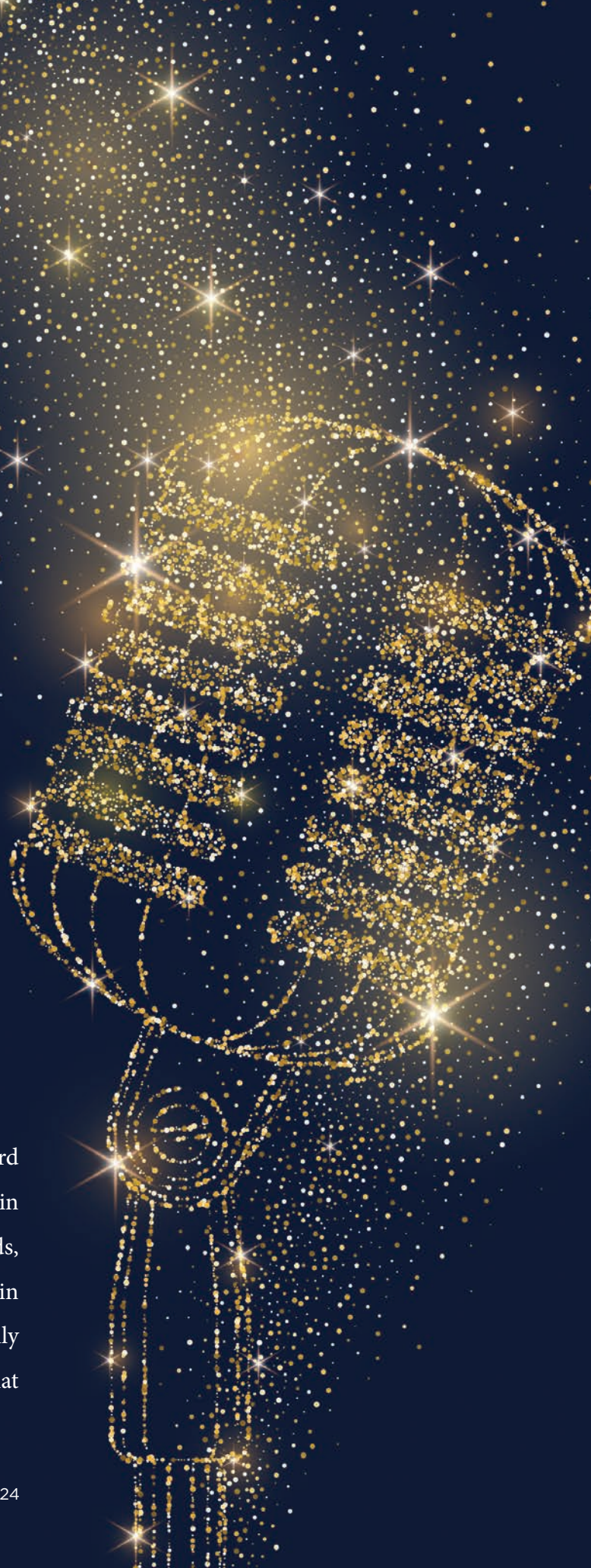
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# Stu Weitz Still Crooning

JESSE BERNSTEIN | JE STAFF

Back in the mid-'70s, Stu Weitz thought he might record an album. With his then-wife, he spent a few hours in the studio singing and creating the demo. Afterwards, he says, his wife turned to him, furious. "I'm not living in motels!," he recalls her saying. "And I said, 'You're really jumping the gun here, but I appreciate that you have that much confidence in me!'"





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## WEITZ

Continued from Page 22

The album never materialized, but nevertheless, Weitz has spent the last 40-odd years entertaining all over the Philadelphia area, singing the songs of his youth at b'nai mitzvah, weddings and other special occasions (and also marrying his second wife, Marci, of now nearly 30 years). At 72, he doesn't perform quite as much as he used to, or at the same clubs — he was at Warmdaddy's before it was Warmdaddy's — but you can still find him singing Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett and old Gershwin tunes at elder-living facilities and at the occasional milestone event. Not that he'd have it any other way.

"I've been entertaining since I was 3 years old," he said.

Weitz was born in Mount Airy, but grew up primarily in the Wyncote/Cheltenham area. There, he learned to play piano and sing from his father, Ted Weitz. Known professionally as Ted White, his father had written songs for Louis Armstrong, among others, and met Ella Fitzgerald when she was just beginning her legendary career. He was also a songwriter, with a radio show on WCAU in addition to a side-gig as a joke-writer, writing Henny Youngman-style one-liners for the *Jewish Exponent's* "Borscht Belt" section (since discontinued). This was all in addition to



▲ Stu Weitz

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“I’ve been  
entertaining  
since I was  
3 years old.”

going door to door, selling everything from furniture to cars to second mortgages in installments, a business begun by Weitz’s grandfather.

Meanwhile, in the family basement, he taught Weitz how to keep time with the music, when to enter a song and when to repeat something for effect. Weitz still does a cabaret show in honor of his father’s memory. (Weitz’s sons are both entertainers as well; Adam Weitz is the owner of A Sharp Productions, a local entertainment company that he also performs for).

Weitz was a classmate of Reggie Jackson at Wyncote Elementary and went to high school with Yonatan Netanyahu, the Israeli hero who was felled in the operation to free Jewish hostages at the international airport in Entebbe, Uganda, and whose younger brother is now Israel’s prime minister. At Blue Mountain Camp in Stroudsburg, Weitz played the lead in *The Pajama Game* and Freddy in *My Fair Lady*. In college, as he started to sing in doo-wop and other a cappella groups on the steps of Mitten Hall at Temple University, he’d sometimes be joined by Daryl Hall.

Though Weitz has since spent his life in financial planning, it was around those Mitten Hall sessions that he started getting professional gigs, which his parents were pleased with. “They were good with it as long as there was some revenue,” he said.



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SEE WEITZ | Page 26



# WEITZ

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He'd go down and sing at a club on Front and Chestnut streets, and even though he and his friends didn't get paid much, they had a lot of good times there. One evening, he'd finished a performance when he was approached by somebody with an idea.

Barbara Dornay, a local booking agent, got him to a bar mitzvah at High Point Racquet Club, and Weitz, though certainly not nervous, admits now that he was not yet sure what the role of a bar mitzvah entertainer was supposed to be; he showed up in a tuxedo and red tie, and Dornay had him lose the tie and run the candle-lighting ceremony. In the decades since, he's picked up the tricks of the trade; if you're calling a bride out to dance with her father, make sure she's not in the bathroom.

He remembers a function where the father was intent on singing a karaoke version of Joe Cocker's "You Are So Beautiful" to his daughter. Weitz had him practice over and over to get it down cold. When the day of the even came, the father got cold feet. "I

► Stu Weitz hugs a woman who had just turned 105. For her, he sang Sinatra's "Young At Heart."

PHOTO PROVIDED



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Today, Weitz's still bringing down the house at senior facilities (he takes pride in performing songs by Jewish composers).

said, 'Listen, you're gonna have to go in the corner, have a little sip of something from the bar. ... This is not something you're ever gonna have a chance to do over again,' he recalls telling the frightened father. "You gotta do this one." In the end, the father of the bride did what he set out to do, and the whole party was in tears.

Today, Weitz's still bringing down the house at senior facilities, still singing Sinatra and still singing Irving Berlin compositions (he takes pride in performing songs by Jewish composers). He's been leading Shabbat services at Sunrise Senior Living Community near Temple Sinai for 13 years, in addition to regular gigs in support of Variety, a charity for children with disabilities. He's also performed for groups of people who are all turning 100, which, along with the senior living centers, are some of his favorites.

"Even though I don't have my parents anymore, I go around to some of these places and hold their hands, and just imagine that it could be my parents in there," he said. •

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# Painter Pushes 90. Keeps Active

JESSE BERNSTEIN | JE STAFF

**Z**elda Edelson's solo exhibition in November at the Old City Jewish Art Center wasn't the first time that she's showed her paintings to the world. In fact, the 89-year-old West Philadelphia native has had her work displayed in Ardmore and in her one-time home of Woodbridge, Conn. But this show was certainly her most unique.

**SEE PAINTER** | Page 30



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## Painter

Continued from Page 28

"It's really meaningful," Edelson said. "It gave me a view of my paintings that I never experienced before, simply because you don't have enough space to show stuff in most places." (Edelson often paints on 30-inch-by-40-inch canvases, emulating the scale of some of her favorite painters.)

It would be accurate, in some sense, to say that it all started when one of her sons, Jon, along with his wife, Rachel, decided that Edelson's abstract work deserved to be seen by a wider audience. Rachel Edelson's research led her to Art for the Cash Poor, an exhibition where two of Edelson's paintings were displayed, and one was even sold. Following that, it was decided that her work merited a full show, and Edelson was connected with local curator Amie Potsic.

It would, however, be more accurate to say that it all started in 1947, when Edelson (then Zelda Toll) was a senior in high school.







▲ Zelda Edelson

PHOTOS PROVIDED



Her father was in the wholesale grain business, working for a pair of race-horse owning Quakers who wanted to find a way to get cheap grain; her mother, born outside of Odessa, Ukraine was a homemaker (they belonged to a synagogue in Wynnefield-Overbrook, but Judaism was not central to their lives, Edelson said). Together with her two older brothers and her younger sister, Edelson lived on Millick Street, near 60th and Market streets, and attended the Girls' High School of Philadelphia when it was still located at 17th and Spring Garden streets.

It was there that she and her sister were introduced to the world of art.

Edelson took a course from experimental artist Jack Bookbinder, prominent in Philadelphia in his day. Her lifelong love of art was sparked by his education, and encouraged by her mother — who herself always remained bitter over being forced to leave school at a young age — Edelson attended the University of Chicago, majoring in English literature. Soon after, she married Marshall Edelson, a professor of psychiatry at Yale University who shared her love of literature, if not her passion for painting.

Together, they had three children, and Edelson

**SEE PAINTER** | Page 32

ROMANCE IN WINTER (2012)

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*"Painting is not just what  
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## Painter

Continued from Page 31

juggled taking care of them with her career as an editor. At first, she edited the magazine *Discovery*, and then served as editor and head of print publications at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History for more than 20 years. Her connection to painting during this time was more appreciation than practice, though she occasionally took courses at night while her children were growing up.

It was not until her retirement in 1995 that she began to paint seriously. After years as an editor, she wanted something more public-facing.

"I wanted to do something that was my own thing," she said.

She took courses in New Haven in drawing and painting, but as her tastes grew more abstract, she struck out on her own. During this time, her work was occasionally displayed in local galleries.

She lists artists like Paul Klee and Jackson Pollock as some of her primary influences, but notes that for her, like for any artist, it's not simply other works that inspire her.

"I feel a lot of influences, not necessarily those names," she said. "Painting is not just what comes out of your hand or arm, it's what's in your brain, and that's the ultimate decisive part of the experience of painting."

In 2005, her husband died, and Edelson decided to return to Philadelphia; today, she lives in a retirement community in Haverford, along with her sister (her brothers have both died). And she continues to produce work at a steady clip, even since the conclusion of her exhibition.

As for plans for another exhibition in the future? "Yeah, if anybody wants to do one," Edelson laughed. "I'm very prolific." •

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► Caliph's Palace (2018)





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