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PUBLISHER'S REPRESENTATIVE  
**STACYE ZEISLER**

MANAGING EDITOR  
**ANDY GOTLIEB**

STAFF WRITERS  
**SASHA ROGELBERG**  
**JARRAD SAFFREN**

CONTRIBUTING WRITER  
**ELEANOR LINAFELT**

PRODUCTION DIRECTOR  
**JENI MANN**

ART DIRECTOR  
**STEVE BURKE**

DIRECTOR OF SALES  
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ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVES  
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Dean Malissa, as George Washington, inspects his farm.

Courtesy of Dean Malissa



# Dean Malissa Wanted to Be An Actor. He Ended Up as George Washington

JARRAD SAFFREN | JE STAFF

**G**eorge Washington's legacy is quite literally the United States of America.

So when Daniel Shippey became the nation's foremost Washington impersonator at Mount Vernon, the first president's Virginia estate-turned historical attraction, Shippey often heard that he had big boots to fill.

Except those Mount Vernon workers and Washington fans weren't talking about the Continental Army general.

They were talking about Dean Malissa, the Upper Moreland resident and Jewish actor who portrayed Washington before Shippey.

"He set a very high bar," Shippey said.

From 2004 until the outbreak of COVID-19, Malissa served as the foremost Washington impersonator in the nation that Washington fathered. Malissa did about 150 events a year, with half coming at Mount Vernon, almost a three-hour drive from his then-home in Philadelphia.

He donned colonial-era jackets, collars, cuffs and lapels; he stood with Washington's formal and upright posture and spoke in his equally formal diction; he articulated the first president's personal credo of "deeds, not words."

Malissa embodied the world-historic character before both Mount Vernon visitors and crowds across the country. In a stadium in Arizona, he performed for tens of thousands. At the National Archives Museum in Washington, D.C. one July 4, he read the Declaration of



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Independence before a crowd of 500,000.

The Philadelphia native also played Washington at a White House state dinner for former French president Nicolas Sarkozy and at a billionaire's birthday party in Florida, among other notable events. One time, he even told a CIA director that he couldn't talk to him about tradecraft during the Revolutionary War.

"I said, 'You'll have to forgive me,'" Malissa recalled of the conversation. "I don't know you from Adam."

The director cracked up.

As Washington, Malissa didn't merely recall lines. He embodied the first president. He was him.

For the actor, it was never the role he imagined; but it became the role of his life — the only one he played for the last two decades of his career.

"It's one of the most important stories ever told," Malissa said. "It's been an honor to be able to tell the story."

The Philadelphia native was phasing into retirement even before the pandemic. At the time, Malissa, now 68, was pushing into his late 60s. He had also lost his father, mother and wife between 2017-'20.

Unlike Washington, though, who retired to Mount Vernon after his second presidential term, Malissa wants to keep traveling. He named England, Japan and several other countries as places he hopes to visit.

"I'd like to spend extended amounts of time in some of these countries," Malissa said.

That's hardly a surprise, as Malissa never does anything half-speed.

Before portraying Washington, he was a corporate guy for 26 years, working for Penn Ventilation, his family's business, which manufactured industrial and commercial ventilation equipment. After graduating from college, Malissa started working for the company, rising from junior sales rep to senior vice president.

In 1999, when the family decided to sell the business after 71 years, Malissa had an equity stake. The 46-year-old made enough money to take some time off after the sale.

At the time, Malissa only knew one thing: He was finished with a corporate world that he never loved in the first place.

"I would tell people I was in business, but not of business," Malissa said. "It was no longer enjoyable to me."

Acting, though, had been enjoyable to Malissa. He just hadn't done it since high school.

So after the sale, he tried it out again, landing the lead role in "Damn Yankees" at Beth Shalom Congregation in Elkins Park.

Still, it was just community theater. And while the voice in Malissa's head was telling him to act professionally, it was quieter than the voices telling him to do other things.

Then, one day, the production needed a prop for Malissa's character. So, the leading man went downtown to Hocus Pocus, a magic shop.

The owner gave Malissa the prop, rang him up and asked him a truly strange question.

"What do you want to do with the rest of your life?"

Malissa did not know the man. He had not told him of his current dilemma. But he explained it anyway, and the man had an answer.

"Listen to the quietest voice," he said. "Because it's the one you want but are most afraid of."

"I left the shop with my head exploding," Malissa said.

He pulled out his late '90s cell phone, lifted the antenna and





▲ Dean Malissa, right, has played George Washington for about two decades.

Courtesy of Dean Malissa

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called his wife.

"I'm going to become an actor," he said.

"That's great," she answered.

His wife agreed to move up from part-time to full-time in her education career so the couple could have health insurance. And Malissa started auditioning. He got small roles in network TV shows and commercials, as well as movies shot in Philadelphia.

But in 2000, he met fellow Philadelphia resident William Sommerfield, then the foremost Washington impersonator at Mount Vernon. Sommerfield got Malissa to fill in for him when he couldn't make an event.

Initially, though, it was just "another acting job," Malissa said.

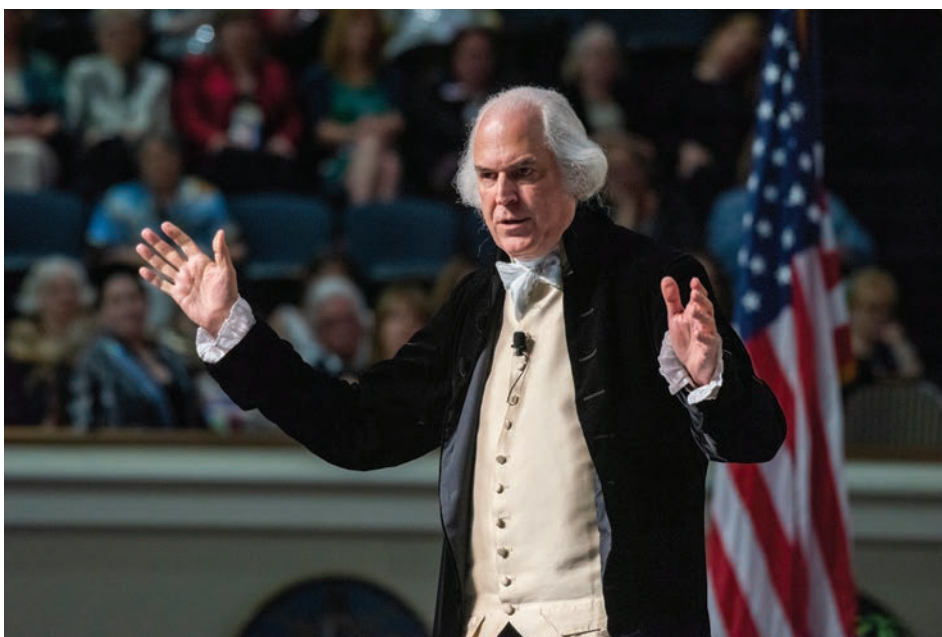
Until he fell in love with both the role and its historical weight.

The 70-year-old Sommerfield was looking for his own replacement. But before he started training Malissa, he gave him a warning.

"Washington will take over your life, if you're going to do it properly," Malissa recalled his mentor saying.

After a four-year transition, Malissa filled Sommerfield's big boots. Now, Shippey is filling Malissa's.

Mount Vernon has already named Malissa as Washington



▲ Dean Malissa, as George Washington, speaks to a crowd.

Courtesy of Dean Malissa

emeritus. The leading man says he will continue to portray Washington "selectively."

"I'm thinking of the way Washington signed his letters: 'I remain your humble and obedient servant,'" he concluded. ●

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▲ 'Tree of Sorrow' was published in July and tells the story of Richard Bank growing up as the grandson of Holocaust survivors.

# FROM 'TREE OF SORROW' TO FAMILY TREES: PASSING DOWN HOLOCAUST MEMORIES

SASHA ROGELBERG | JE STAFF

**R**ichard Bank's pocket watch, given to him by his grandfather and Shoah survivor Ludwig Frank, hasn't kept time for decades, save for two occasions.

The first was shortly after Bank's 30th birthday, when his wife Francine gifted him a stand for the watch: a spindly silver tree with no leaves, but a tear beginning to drip from the top branch. "Ludwig Frank" is engraved on the stand, winding around the tree's roots and trunk, and the stand was dubbed the 'Tree of Sorrow.'

While sitting in his study, Bank, 74, touched the watch resting on the tree, and the second hand immediately began spinning,

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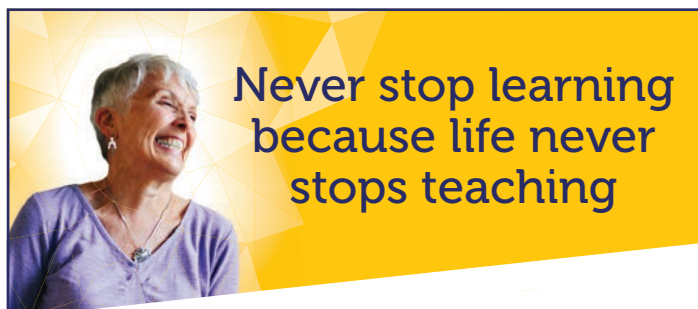
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the watch ticking rhythmically.

Though the watch went silent the next morning, two weeks later, the same thing happened. Upon showing his mother Ruth Frank the watch stand, Bank once again noticed the watch ticking again, and then stopping, remaining still for the next 44 years.

"The message of the watch is survival," Bank said.

Like his grandfather before him, Bank gave his grandson Hayden the watch and the Tree of Sorrow for his bar mitzvah on Oct. 24. Along with the watch, Bank also gave Hayden the responsibility of carrying on the memory of the Holocaust, the same responsibility Ludwig Frank passed down to his grandson through the watch.

Bank describes himself as "growing up in the shadow of the Holocaust," a phrase that doubles as the subtitle of his newest book 'Tree of Sorrow,' published by Auctus Publishers in July 2021.

Though a lawyer for most of his life, Bank has been writing since the age of 12. He lived in Strawberry Mansion and went to grade school in Mt. Airy before attending Temple University and later University of Pennsylvania, where he studied law. Throughout school, Bank had a passion for writing.

The story of his grandfather's watch was first published in The Jewish Exponent in 1978 and is again recounted in 'Tree of Sorrow.'



▲ Richard Bank with his "oma" and "opa" when he was 3





▲ When Hayden Bank visited his great-grandmother's house, he was fascinated with a 1914 photograph of the Frank family.

Courtesy of Hayden Bank

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The memoir, which mostly unfolds Bank's childhood and time in undergraduate and law school, is the third book in what Bank calls an "inadvertent trilogy."

He published "Feig" and "I Am Terezin" in 2014 and 2017, respectively, and while the former is fiction and the latter, non-fiction, 'Tree of Sorrow' is a work of creative nonfiction, and a personal one at that.

Despite growing up with an "oma" and "opa" who survived Theresienstadt and a mother who was a refugee of the Holocaust, Bank knew surprisingly little about his family's experience of the Shoah.

Though Bank could speak some German to communicate with his grandparents, they skirted the topic of the Holocaust.

"They never spoke about it. My mother never spoke about it. Her sister never spoke about it. The family never spoke about it," Bank said.

Despite his grandmother living until he was 21, Bank never asked her about her time in Theresienstadt.

He published "I Am Terezin" about the camp without knowing that he also had an aunt on his mother's side who died in Theresienstadt. Four other great aunts and uncles — his grandfather's siblings — also died in the Shoah. He had no idea until he spoke with his mother shortly before the book's publication.

"I grew up with the idea that you don't ask," Bank said. "That's why I'm writing so much about it now — because I do want to know about it, and I want to share with others, so that other people know about it and don't take that same attitude."



▲ Hayden Bank (center) with his grandparents, Francine (left) and Richard Bank.

Courtesy of Richard Bank



“We’ve always been like the same person. But when I got to read his book, that’s when I realized we basically have the same exact characteristics as each other.”

HAYDEN BANK

Bank is still committed to learning more about his family history, largely thanks to his grandson.

Hayden, 13, inspired by an older cousin’s family tree on a different side of his family, took on the responsibility of creating a Frank family tree in September 2020 as a project during COVID.

“I wanted it done; I didn’t want anyone else doing it,” Hayden said. “And I felt like this was my opportunity to do it.”

With the help of Bank’s cousins, Hayden uploaded his family tree to Ancestry.com. Hayden and Bank then received an email from Roland Paul, a historian who had been in contact with Bank’s mother, whom he met during her trips back to her hometown of Odenbach, Germany after the Holocaust. From there, the family tree grew even larger.

The family tree now spans eight generations, with over 120 entrees. Hayden hopes to share the updated family tree with Bank’s cousins and extended family at a family reunion next spring.

Hayden’s great grandmother and Bank’s mother died when Hayden was 9 years old, but Hayden remembers visiting his great grandmother’s apartment and finding a photograph of the Frank family from 1914. Before his family tree research, Hayden could only identify a few of the relatives in the photo. Now he can identify almost all of them.

At the pending family reunion, Hayden will meet some of Bank’s cousins for the first time. Bank will be meeting some of them for the first time too.

Hayden calls his grandfather every day and has read ‘Tree of Sorrow’ and the books that preceded it. As time goes on, Hayden thinks he gets more and more similar to his grandfather.

“We’ve always been like the same person,” Hayden said. “But when I got to read his book, that’s when I realized we basically have the same exact characteristics as each other.”

Bank insists that when he gave Hayden Ludwig Frank’s watch and the Tree of Sorrow, he had no agenda for what he believed Hayden should do with it.

And Hayden has a fierce loyalty to Bank: “I always tell him to this day, ‘I’m going to make sure I take care of you one day.’”

Because of Hayden’s commitment to his family, Bank has no concerns about the fate of his grandfather’s watch.

“He’s already fulfilled his responsibility to the watch,” Bank said. “Maybe one day he’ll want to pass it on, and then he’ll pass on the story of the watch and the memory of the Holocaust.” •

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# South Philadelphia Native Preserves Jewish Community and History

SASHA ROGELBERG | JE STAFF

**H**aving grown up in South Philadelphia in the 1950s, Alberta Marcus knows a thing or two about community.

“It was like being part of a family. Our neighbors were more family than friends,” Marcus said. “They would block off traffic, and we’d have block parties where everybody cooked food. It was a very caring community.”

She maintained a similar familial connection to her neighbors when she moved to her home in Northeast Philadelphia in her early 20s — the same home she lives in today.

Community-building more than shaped Marcus’ life; it’s how she’s making her mark on the Philadelphia community, serving as a founding member of the 51-year strong Unstructured Synagogue Havurah, a veteran teacher and informal documentarian of 20th-century Philadelphia life.

Marcus, 82, did not attend synagogue as a child, and did not have a ceremony to celebrate her becoming bat mitzvah, but her family was religious: Her mother kept kosher, and the family would celebrate holidays with neighbors of extended family.

“My mother was one of five kids — two sets of twins — so we would get together and celebrate the holidays together,” Marcus said.

She continued that model of Jewish living into adulthood.

In the 1960s, havurot — a Hebrew word meaning fellowship — sprung up all over the country; they were a means of providing egalitarian, democratized ritual experiences without the necessity of a rabbi or group leader.

Marcus and her husband Warren Marcus helped form their own havurah — dubbed the Unstructured Synagogue Havurah — in October 1970. They were joined by five other couples. The havurah recently celebrated 51 years together at an in-person gathering in Feasterville.

“It’s a totally different experience, a havurah,” Marcus said. “You don’t just observe, you participate.”

◀ **Alberta Marcus (center) lived in South Philadelphia before moving to Northeast Philadelphia in her early 20s, where she still lives today.**

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▲ Alberta Marcus with husband Warren Marcus on their wedding day in 1960

“It’s a totally different experience, a havurah. You don’t just observe, you participate.”

ALBERTA MARCUS

In the havurah’s early years, the couples’ children came of b’nai mitzvah ages, and Marcus’ son and daughter Sandy Marcus Lieberman had the experience she didn’t: celebrating becoming b’nai mitzvah among community members. Both children taught themselves to read Hebrew and read Torah, another opportunity Marcus missed growing up.

She remembers her son’s d’var Torah on the development of languages and her daughter’s on women in religion, delivered to the havurah in a member’s living room. She learned from them both, she said.

Along with other group members, Marcus learned each Torah portion, performing weekly skits.

Second only to her 51-year tenure as a founding member of the Unstructured Synagogue Havurah is her tenure as a teacher in Philadelphia, where she taught at both private and public schools for more than 30 years. She was a certified senior career teacher.

“I just wanted to instill in children the desire to learn,” Marcus said.



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But Marcus didn't always feel that way. In fact, she didn't intend to become a teacher at all, turning only to the profession when her father died in her 20s. Marcus married shortly afterward and began teaching kids in the neighborhood.

She had previously enrolled at The Pennsylvania State University before transferring to Temple University and then the University of the Arts, originally wanting to study science and medical research.

Having come to terms with the fact that teaching would be the way for her to make the greatest community impact, Marcus began teaching kindergarten at the Alain Locke School and a local Quaker school.

Marcus's most rewarding experiences teaching were the times when she was able to hear the thoughts of students and learn from them, she said.

On most days, she would sit the students in a circle and have them go around, giving their opinion on various topics and questions.

One student gave a response that Marcus still remembers to this day and is one that reflects her values as someone who is deeply embedded in a community, rather than instructing one from the outside: "Everybody is important."


Now retired, Marcus has found other ways to continue to learn and find community in a time of profound and pervasive isolation from the ongoing pandemic.

She has taken creative writing classes at Holy Family University in Philadelphia with a fellow havurah member. Marcus also has taken classes on the Old Testament (taught by a priest), music, art and philosophy over her 11 years as a student there.

"I like to learn," she said.

In her creative writing course, Marcus is working on documenting the story of her upbringing, something she hopes to pass down to her 23-year-old granddaughter Anna, who recently asked Marcus to take her to Marcus' South Philadelphia childhood home — which was embellished with decorated closets and archways by her father that differentiated it from the other row homes.

Though as Marcus relishes the memories of her upbringing in her tight-knit neighborhood, she also recognizes how much things have changed since her time attending South Philly block parties and


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▲ Alberta Marcus (center, standing) at granddaughter Anna's bat mitzvah

starting the havurah.

Marcus calls her home more “isolated” than it was in the past, and not just due to the pandemic.

“People just go to work, and when they come home, they’re tired,” she said.

As her daughter looks to join a new Reconstructionist synagogue in the area, Marcus also has to contend with different family traditions and practices. Her daughter was previously a member at Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel, where Marcus attended a few services and traveled to Israel with a group.

But Marcus is hesitant to becoming fully involved with a congregation, preferring to meet with havurah members, which





Courtesy of Sandy Marcus Lieberman

is still a dozen or so members strong, but is now a group that is mostly well into their 70s and 80s.

Even amid changes to her neighborhood and to the Unstructured Synagogue Havurah, where she remains the last living founding member, Marcus is not interested in lamenting.

"I don't feel sad at all now," she said. "It's been a very rewarding experience." •

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# At 89, Burt Forman is Still Teaching ... and Dancing

His KleinLife Trivia Game is Popular with Seniors

JARRAD SAFFREN | JE STAFF

► Burt Forman  
Photo by Inna Gulko



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**E**very week at KleinLife in Northeast Philadelphia, 89-year-old Burt Forman hosts a trivia contest called “Burt’s Brain Games.”

Forman’s board features six categories with 10 questions per section. Twelve senior citizens take turns picking questions and attempting to answer them. If the selector answers incorrectly, the other contestants jump to raise their hands first.

The Jewish host tallies up points and gives out gelt to the week’s winner. Throughout the game, he dances to music playing from a speaker off to the side, laughs with his contestants and keeps the peace as they get competitive with each other.

It’s like “Jeopardy” but as a sort of hangout/dance party for older people.

“It’s a lot of fun,” Forman said.

Forman doesn’t just emcee the game once a week. He spends two hours a day coming up with questions and making boards. His categories can be as normal as history and as quirky as one-syllable cities.

In about six years of hosting games,



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▲ Burt Forman at his recent birthday celebration at a local diner. Courtesy of Tami Brauer

Forman has accumulated 15 books that hold about 85 topics each. He tries his best to never repeat questions.

“It gives me something to do, and I enjoy people, and I enjoy conversing with them and getting them all excited,” the retired biology teacher said. “I have one guy who calls me every Monday, and I have to go through old books and play the game over the phone.”

Carol J. Robins, like most contestants, attends the game every week. She said she finds it educational and good for the memory.

She also said it’s nice to see people and laugh. But perhaps more than anything, it’s the host who keeps her coming back.

“He comes up with these very interesting topics,” Robins added. “It’s like he’s still teaching.”

Forman retired from his teaching position at Samuel Fels High School in Philadelphia at age 62.

For years, he enjoyed life as a retiree. Forman and his wife, Kay Forman, took trips and attended Broadway shows.

But when Kay Forman came down with dementia, the couple had to find an activity close to home that could help. That was when they started going to KleinLife.

Months later, KleinLife Program Director Shelley

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Geltzer was looking for new activity suggestions. Forman pitched his trivia contest. Geltzer loved it.

Pretty soon, about 25 people were coming each week, including Kay Forman. Then, he started taking the game to other senior facilities in the area.

By 2020, Paul's Run Retirement Community, The Philadelphia Protestant Home and two KleinLife locations were paying Forman to host "Burt's Brain Games." After Kay Forman died in 2018, it became the thing that made "my day go fast," Forman said.

"If I don't do it, I'll get old," he added.

It gives me something to do, and I enjoy people, and I enjoy conversing with them and getting them all excited. I have one guy who calls me every Monday, and I have to go through old books and play the game over the phone.

**BURT FORMAN**

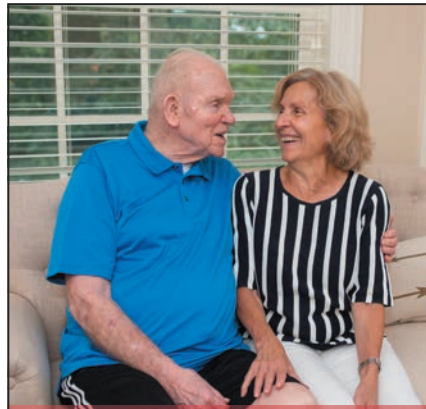
Yvette Greenberg, Forman's step-daughter, used to come to the games with the host and play his music. Forman called her his Vanna White, a reference to the "Wheel of Fortune" co-host who presses the letters.

Greenberg said the people in the trivia groups got so close that, when a contestant had to go to the hospital, she would go visit.

"They were just so much fun. They were always so excited to see me. They made me feel good," she added. "Hugging me. Always thanking me for being there."

But when the pandemic hit, those facilities closed, and Forman had to cancel his games. During COVID, he cooked, baked, read and watched TV.

Yet without "Burt's Brain Games," he felt a void. And then, even after facilities



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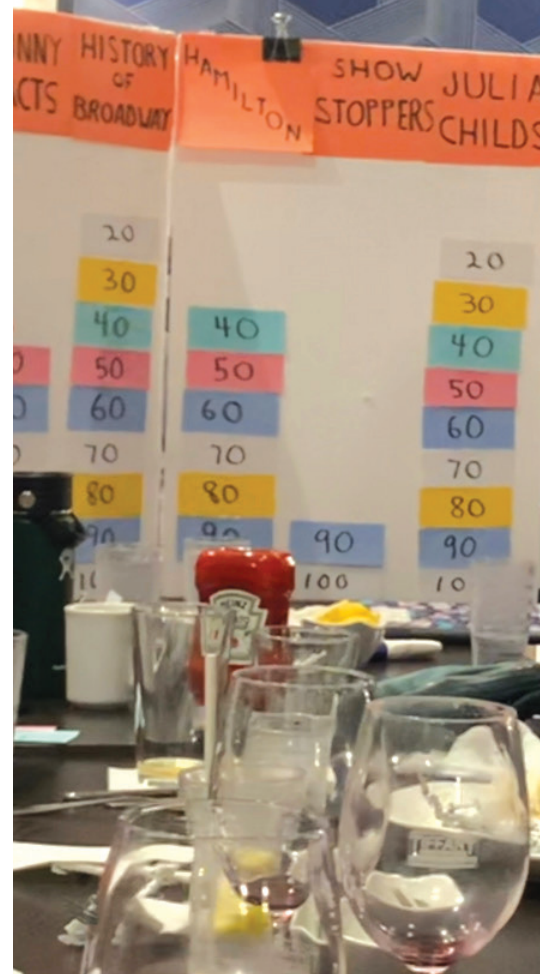


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▲ Burt Forman enjoys his birthday meal at a local diner. His trivia board is behind him.

Courtesy of Tami Brauer

started reopening in 2021, they didn't call Forman.

Except KleinLife in Northeast Philly.

In September, Forman returned to the place where his game started.

The number of contestants was a little smaller. He wasn't getting paid anymore. And his Vanna White now had a full-time job and couldn't co-host.

But Forman was back.

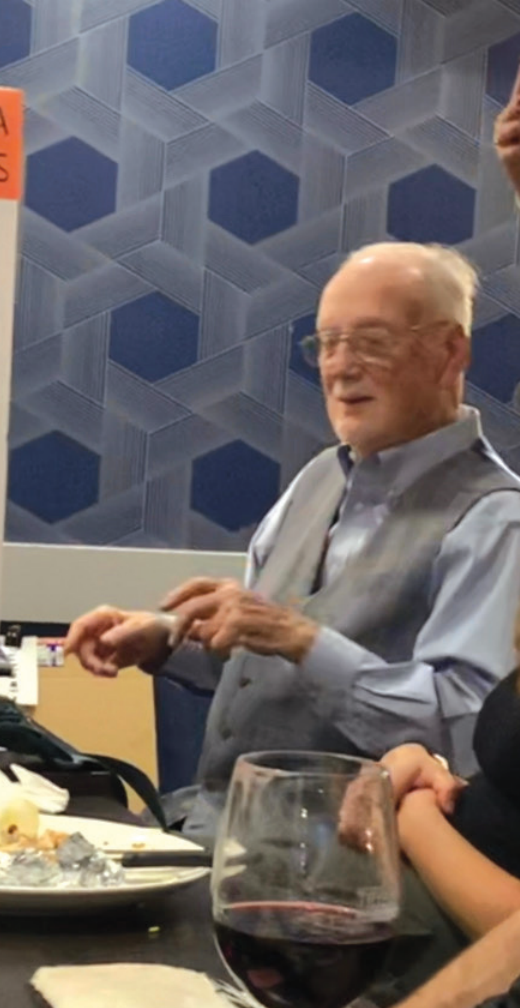
"It was so good to come back," he said. "I put a lot of work into it."

The Alex Trebek of Northeast Philadelphia has a solid group of 12 who play each week at KleinLife. He has thought about reaching out to the other facilities, but he's a little hesitant due to the ongoing pandemic.

So for now, he's content to come up with more and more categories and to keep making his days go by fast.

Last week, his categories included oxymorons, fossils, firecracker blondes from Hollywood history, Bellevue Hospital and Polly Adler, the 20th-century





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▲ Burt Forman and his trivia board

Photo by Inna Gulko

madam who built a business of bordellos.

"It's really very informative," Forman said.

A month ago, Forman and his family celebrated his birthday in a private room at a diner. His daughter, Tami Brauer, had to reserve the room because Forman wanted to play the game with his children and grandchildren.

At first, Brauer was like, "Really?" But over a couple of hours, Forman asked questions and danced. And the whole family laughed and did their best to answer.

"We loved watching him do that," Brauer said.

Forman plans on continuing the games for as long as he can at KleinLife. At 89, he is still sharp and active, according to his daughters.

He still does his own grocery shopping and goes to the library each week to research new categories.

"His brain is functioning amazingly," Brauer said. "He knows way more about life than I do."

Contestants tell Forman the same thing.

"They're amazed at some of the things I teach them. (They say) 'I never knew that,'" Forman said.

"I'm satisfied," he concluded. ●

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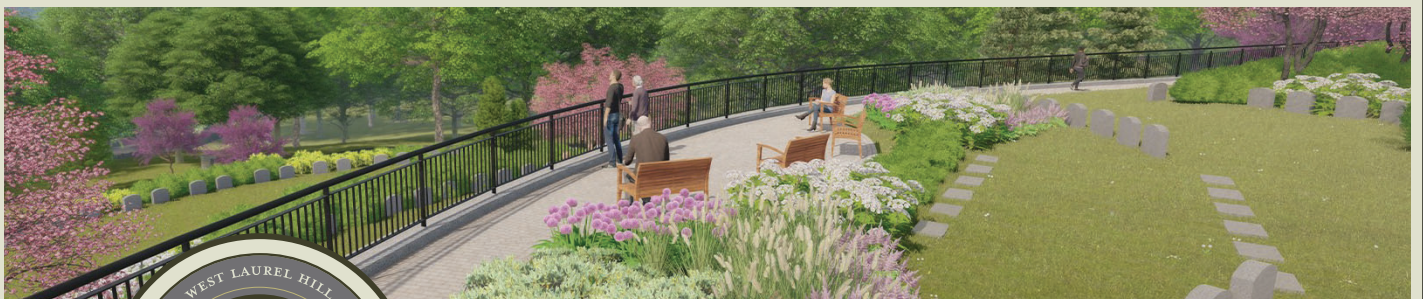
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