



Telling Our Story

JACK AND I HAVE BEEN HAPPILY MARRIED FOR 32 YEARS. Our family dynamic has always been solid, comfortable, and nurturing. It got even better when grandchildren came along. And Jack is the world's best grandfather! He has always been a "kid magnet." Jack was always a particularly intelligent and very well-educated man, with a wide range of interests and knowledge in absolutely everything, a real Renaissance man. Conversations were interesting and the stimulating activities we did together were a large part of the dynamic of our relationship.

Most of that has now disappeared. About five years ago, Jack was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. The diagnosis does hit the spouse harder than it does the patient, because it is usually made when the person has already progressed to the point where the understanding and ramifications of this disease are not fully understood. This is one of the few blessings of Alzheimer's. The personal, financial, legal, medical, and emotional ramifications were dizzying to contemplate. So much work to do, so much planning, and so much adjusting to a new kind of relationship.

The power dynamic in our marriage shifted little by little, and I became a caregiver above all. I was always exhausted and not well-equipped to handle the personality and behavioral changes that come with this disease. I needed help.

The Alzheimer's Association suggested I find a support group. That was my first association with the Kaplen JCC on the Palisades. I love the support group, which is held in a beautiful setting (not in a dementia facility). The leaders are warm and knowledgeable, and the participants supportive and sympathetic. I have found a place there where I can get information, tips, helpful hints, as well as a place to vent, cry, and feel support from others on this same journey. This program at the JCC has been a lifeline for me. I no longer feel alone and I have made friends.

My second association with the Kaplen JCC is with the ARC program, the senior program for those with Alzheimer's or other kinds of dementia. It is a really superb program, and I really wanted Jack to participate.

"The benefit for me of Jack attending this program is obvious. I have two days a week to myself. I had not been alone in my house for five years, and it is a truly important and beautiful experience that should not be underestimated. The respite for me was so critical to my mental and physical health. And I know that Jack is being well-cared-for, safe, and well-fed."



PHOTOS: ARC participants at the JCC enjoy a variety of activities. Photos by Jane Kicks.



Jack can never tell me about his day at the JCC, not even what he ate for lunch; however, he comes home happy. And when he rests in his easy chair in the late afternoon, he is content and in a good mood. This rarely happens on other days, so this provides yet an additional benefit for me.

As for the ARC program, my caregiver waxes poetic when describing it. She says it's one of the only ways that a patient with Alzheimer's gets stimulation, motivation, and treated like a human being. Perhaps this keeps the disease from progressing as rapidly. Each day there is something physical (chair yoga, weights, and stretching for example), something cognitive, (word games or letter games), social, singing, dancing and even intergenerational relationships with two and three-year-olds! The latter is my husband's favorite time of the day. He still totally enjoys children and continues to be a "kid magnet!"

I attend the program periodically and am always blown away by how well-run and well-planned the day is. Caregivers, spouses, participants, volunteers as well as the directors all participate in the fun.

"I have witnessed my husband be more alive than he is at home....and I believe the major take-away for him is that he has a place where 'he can be all that he can be' at this stage in his life in a non-threatening, supportive atmosphere."

This is thanks to the wonderful spirit of the leaders of the program. It is so obvious that they are giving with their hearts.

One great sadness in my marriage nowadays is that there are fewer and fewer special moments of feeling between us and fewer shared happy activities. But I recently spent a few hours with Jack at the program where we all celebrated the 104th birthday of a fellow participant, and the spirit, the joy, the fun, the dancing, and the sense of community were just amazing. Everyone participated big time and my husband even sang a song for the group, which he never did before. This provided some very special moments for Jack and me to share together. He may have forgotten them as soon as we were walking to the car, but I treasure and savor these times and thank the JCC for providing them."

Excerpted from a speech given by a Kaplen Adult Reach Center (ARC) participant's spouse at a recent event. ARC is the JCC's social day care program serving frail senior adults who suffer from Alzheimer's disease and related forms of dementia. For more information, please contact Lauren Glubo at 201.408.1452 or lglubo@jccotp.org.

**Names have been changed to respect author's privacy.*