ne never knows when life can turn on a dime. One minute you’re a happy family, building memories and traditions and putting down roots, and the next, someone you love gets ill or you receive bad news, and suddenly your life and your world is turned upside-down.

That’s what recently happened to one JCC member, Bahia. Bahia and her family have been members of the JCC for the last eight years. It was a steady, familiar and welcoming haven for them, and what they especially appreciated was the fact that it was a place where people could make meaningful Jewish connections, and at the same time, completely willing to open its doors and its arms to everyone, whether they were religiously affiliated or not.

From the day we joined, what impressed me most was the mix of people who belonged to the JCC,” says Bahia. “It offers such a healthy, well-rounded environment and I knew from the start that it was a place where I could bring my family, knowing that each of us could enjoy activities and grow as human beings, both separately and together.”

Bahia’s three children – Eli and Max, twin boys, and daughter Audrey – all attended the JCC preschool, where they thrived in their sunny classrooms, spent hours with friends on the amazing playground, and had fun learning to swim in the JCC pool. Bahia has many happy memories of them walking through the halls to the pool in their adorable little bathrobes.

“While my sons were having their first experiences in the nursery, I used to walk around the building with Audrey, who was just one year old at the time, and everyone was so friendly. Whether we were in the lobby or the café or out on the playground, I always felt part of a community and at peace. My boys were getting the most positive start to their education with teachers who were nurturing, knowledgeable and communicative. And my daughter had an equally positive experience when it was her turn to go. Starting school usually requires a period of adjustment, but our experience was seamless. The teachers were so loving and caring and attentive, my kids were happy from day one.”

Life was sailing pretty smoothly for Bahia’s family, until a sudden series of events changed a happy stable life into a nightmare. The triggering event involved a subtle discovery. One of Audrey’s nursery school teachers noticed that her hands occasionally trembled and that her coordination seemed a bit off at times. She suggested that Bahia take Audrey for an occupational therapy evaluation. Bahia made the appointment and after the evaluation, a series of further tests were recommended – a PT evaluation, followed by a neurological one, and finally an MRI. What the MRI ultimately revealed was a large brain tumor in Audrey’s thalamus, a tumor that would have been life threatening had it remained undetected much longer.
This diagnosis was beyond terrifying, and to this day, I credit the JCC and its amazing nursery school staff for saving Audrey’s life. I will be forever grateful to her teacher, whose keen observations led to the early detection that made all the difference in Audrey’s outcome. Fortunately, we also found an incredible neurosurgeon and a fabulous oncology team, and five years later, my daughter is thankfully thriving.”

While Audrey’s health was improving, unfortunately other difficulties arose. The strain of navigating Audrey’s illness and treatments along with other marital stresses led Bahia and her husband to divorce.

Divorce is always sad and complicated and in our case, it came with incredible financial hardship. Little things that were easily affordable before were now out of my budget and I was afraid my JCC membership was something I might no longer be able to maintain. I was heartbroken at the thought and I’ll never forget the day I walked into the membership office and confessed in tears that I had to face the fact that I could no longer afford to be a member. To my utter amazement, I was told that the JCC would never let that happen; that the JCC was our home, the place where my kids were growing up, and that they would do whatever necessary to ensure we could remain members.”

As Bahia learned, the JCC offers scholarship assistance to hundreds of children, families and seniors-in-need each year to ensure that no one is ever denied access to JCC programs and services for financial reasons. Robbie Fried, the membership director, met with Bahia to work out the details, and true to its mission, the JCC made sure that Bahia could keep her dignity and remain a member in a place that had become like a second home to her.

The JCC had helped save my daughter’s life and now they were helping me save my own. I was forced to move out of Tenafly because it was too expensive to live there, and I needed to find second and third sources of income to stay afloat. But the JCC remained my constant, my home base and kept me from being completely exiled from my former life.

I could breathe again knowing my children would not have to lose the world they knew and loved. They could still swim in the JCC pool and prance around the water park during the summer and they could still play racquetball and have fun in the gym or just hang out in the cafe on a Sunday afternoon like we had always done. It gave us some real normalcy in our erratic life.”

In addition to retaining Bahia’s family membership, the JCC took an extra giant step and partnered with a charity for children to provide Audrey with a full scholarship to study ballet at the JCC Dance School. Taking after her mom, Audrey loves to dance and it provides her with valuable therapy as well. After her brain tumor diagnosis, she started dancing at the JCC, which helped her improve her coordination and balance, as well as her confidence. She and her brothers also participate in Camp Dream Street each summer – a free one-week camp at the JCC for children with cancer and their siblings. It’s a bonding experience they look forward to with excitement.

“In the end, what I want to say is this: When I walk through the doors of the JCC, what I feel is warmth and welcome. Everyone says hello and smiles. Everyone is helpful. I can walk into the cafe and the guys behind the counter know without asking to add lemon and ginger to my green juice. The instructors at the gym remember to modify their workout to accommodate my bad knees. There are people of all ages in the locker room getting ready for their various classes and there are people with all kinds of disabilities navigating the building together as a group.

What this says to me is that the JCC is real life, without all the airbrushed and polished veneer you see in so many other places. This is a place for everyone. We all feel included. We all feel remembered. We all feel known. We all feel welcome. And that is priceless.”

The JCC is proud to provide over $600,000 in scholarships to families in need annually. It is through the generosity of the community, who support the JCC and donate to the JCC scholarship fund, that we are able to help. If you would like to partner with us in helping families like Bahia’s get through challenging times, please call Robbie Fried at 201.408.1444 or visit jccotp.org/donate.