The JCC is a place where people can both gather and grow, and for the last 15 years, it’s been a uniquely special place for people struggling over the loss of a loved one. Judy Brauner, a licensed therapist who specializes in helping people cope with depression and grief, has been running small, intimate bereavement workshops for widows and widowers at the J, and this program has helped hundreds of people transition through their loss to regain rich and satisfying lives. For many, this program was their first port of entry to JCC, and after bonding with their group, they went on to find whole new lives within the walls of the JCC.

Sandy lost her husband in an unexpected accident on Mother’s Day six years ago, leaving her alone and bereft. After 64 years of marriage, she didn’t know where to turn or how to fill her days. Her daughter, who worried about her, finally convinced her to join a bereavement group. They researched some local options, and discovered the one at the JCC.

“I wasn’t expecting any miracles,” says Sandy, “but I decided to give it a try, as I felt it would at least give me the chance to speak about my loss with others who were experiencing a similar thing.

“Forming new friendships never really crossed my mind, but from the first meeting, this group made my grief more manageable. It became my lifeline and I really bonded with the people I met. We began grabbing coffee in the JCC café after our meetings, and when the weekly sessions ended, we continued to meet once a month at Judy’s home. And when Judy felt we had healed enough for her to step out of her role as a facilitator, we continued to meet at each other’s homes. Some of us even began meeting for lunch and dinner, and the movies. To this day, I consider these friendships among the closest I’ve ever made. It’s been an incredible gift and we’re still always there for each other when it counts.”
Sandy’s story does not end here, however, as the bereavement group saw her through more than her grief. It became a portal to a whole new life at the JCC.

“With my husband gone, I had more time than I knew what to do with, and I wanted to get out of the house and try some new things. So when I saw that the JCC offered painting classes with a world-class artist, I got really excited and signed up. I’ve been coming every week now for years. Paulette Cochet, the teacher, is such an inspiration, and she’s been so incredibly encouraging. I loved the class so much, I recently enrolled in a drawing class. I use the gym and have enjoyed taking group ex classes as well. These activities help fill my empty places and I’ve made amazing new friendships in all my classes. The JCC has become my great escape and a cure for my loneliness.”

Estee has a similar story. When she lost her husband to brain cancer more than 16 years ago, she moved to Bergen County, but transitioning to a new community and a new life was overwhelming. When she realized she needed some serious support, she joined the JCC bereavement group, and, overnight, the JCC became her new extended family.

“My husband was my best friend,” Estee shares. “We ran a business together and did everything together, so finding a new path for myself was extremely difficult. I had a lot of close friends who were there for me, but at one point, I knew I needed to stop leaning on them. So I joined this group, knowing I’d meet people who had been through the same kind of loss. I didn’t think I’d be able to open up, but the group became my greatest blessing. We shared and confided and cried together. We had someone we could call on day or night. And Judy, who guided us with wisdom, kindness and empathy, truly saved us. It’s been a long road, and over the years, we’ve continued to grow and share in each other’s lives. We’ve attended each other’s children’s Bar Mitzvahs and weddings and we rely on each other to this day.”

Like Sandy, Estee’s journey has also led to a whole new life at the J. Initially, she came to see a movie or take a class. Later, she joined the JCC U program, where she met other people like herself who thrive on new learning experiences. She also became a regular at the weekly Canasta classes, volunteered her time with senior programs, and before she knew it, she was immersed in a whole new social life.

The JCC has really become my extended family,” Estee adds. “It’s the center of my social life, and if I hadn’t discovered the bereavement group at the beginning of my journey, I wouldn’t have the friends or the JCC world I have today. I’m so grateful. I came as a rather lost widow, not knowing where my path was taking me, and found a whole new life. I tell everyone that the JCC literally saved my life.”

Stories like these are course de rigueur at the JCC, where we are proud to be a place that the community can count on to support those in need and to bring people together to learn, bond, heal and grow.

Judy Brauner, who has been such an inspiration to so many people, has this to say:

People who experience a life-altering loss benefit greatly from sharing their grief. What I often witness in facilitating these groups is that those who attend them make enduring friendships because they share powerful commonalities and take real comfort in opening themselves to each other. Life doesn’t end after a loss, and when people are willing to reach out, they frequently find renewed hope and joy. “

For more information on support programs, or any of the wonderful programs the JCC offers to help people grow, learn, and meet new people, visit jccotp.org.