

Willow Glen Resident

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Cover Story



Photograph by Vicki Thompson

Relaxing Time: Chai House resident Ilya Metov, 92, enjoys a game of pool. The Willow Glen Jewish senior living facility remains the only option for residents looking to continue their kosher lifestyle in a retirement home.

To Life: Chai House, a Jewish senior living facility

By Alicia Upano

When Chai House opened its doors 20 years ago in Willow Glen, it became the only senior housing facility between San Francisco and Los Angeles to offer a kosher meal program.

Today, Chai House, on the corner of St. Elizabeth Drive

and Fruitdale Avenue, remains the only option for residents looking to continue their kosher lifestyle in a retirement home. Under Jewish law, the kosher diet forbids the mixing of dairy and meat and the consumption of pork and shellfish.

The idea for Chai House sprang from members of Temple Emanu-El, San Jose's first Jewish congregation in the Rose Garden neighborhood. The group was led by Lee Axelrad and Bob Krandel.

The group believed Chai House would fulfill the needs of the area's sizeable Jewish population. In its planning years, it received the support of the Addison-Penzak Jewish Community Center Silicon Valley, the Jewish Federation of Silicon Valley and Jewish Family Services of Silicon Valley.

After a few false starts, the group formed a nonprofit organization and bought the property at 814 St. Elizabeth Drive, formerly owned by the Salvation Army.

On Dec. 1, 1985, the Chai House opened with one 70-unit building that was funded and subsidized by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The residents of Chai House I qualified for the housing based on federal guidelines, including limited income. Since its opening, Chai House I has maintained a long waiting list.

But the Chai House board of directors knew it was only the beginning.

"We knew the community of people who were eligible for HUD was limited, so that meant there was no room for people who had more financial capabilities," board member Burt Epstein says.

After Chai House I was built, the group immediately went back to the drawing board to create Chai House II. Capital came from fundraising in the Jewish community, a loan

from the Savings Associations Mortgage Co. and the city of San Jose, which required 14 new units be offered at below-market housing rates.

Chai House II's completion a few years later heralded a change for the Chai House complex. Its kosher meal program, the basis of its founding, could finally provide freshly cooked meals onsite.

The first facility did not have a sufficient kitchen to cook for all the residents. To resolve the problem, Chai House residents received lunches from a San Francisco Jewish facility, which were delivered daily. Occasionally the truck would break down, and the meals would arrive late or cold.

Today the kitchen staff is lead by Sherree Curtiss, a food service provider from Eurest. The staff cooks dinner five days a week.

"The chef works wonders with food," says board member Rita Jacobson, who lives in Willow Glen.

In fact, Chai House residents frequently bring visiting families and friends to dine at the complex because it's the only place they can find a good kosher meal, Jacobson says.

Beyond the nutritious meals cooked in accordance with Jewish law, the weekday communal dinners also offer Chai House seniors a social outlet at a time in their lives when many become more isolated from the outside world.

"I like it because you have to get dressed up to walk down to dinner," resident Lilyan Stavis says. "It means getting out of your room."

But those who have embraced Chai House say there's more to the facility than its kosher meal program. Chai is Hebrew for "life," and the 140-unit home aims to help residents continue living fulfilling lives even after they've

moved from their familiar surroundings to smaller, more manageable ones.

Connecting through community

Residents socialize throughout the day, often starting with a morning cup of coffee, then moving on to painting and exercising together. There are residents who spend time playing mah-jongg and others who check out each other's purchases at the facility's convenience store.

To manager Marc Tumlinson, the facility's community is diverse, which only adds to the social atmosphere.

"It's such a hodgepodge of backgrounds and personalities that there's always something exciting going on," Tumlinson says. "They find a quick commonality."

Sixty percent are Jewish, many from New York or Florida. There's also a number of Soviet refugees and a Mandarin Chinese community, Tumlinson says.

Residents also vary in age, but more than 50 residents are over 85 and continue to thrive independently. During Chai House's 20th anniversary celebration on March 5, residents pitched in by helping to decorate the house with tablecloths and flower arrangements, while others gave visitors tours.

Roz Silver was one of the tour guides. She slowly shuffled to her first-floor one-bedroom apartment on the arm of her guest.

Originally from New York, Silver has lived in San Jose for 30 years. When her husband died, Silver looked for a home that would accommodate her limited income. She was accepted into Chai House in 1986.

"I live very simply, very comfortably," says Silver, as she opens the door to her apartment. The apartment looks out onto a courtyard, contains an equal-sized bedroom and

living room and a full kitchen and bath.

A self-confessed "neat freak," Silver has a tidy space. The only embellishment is family photographs tacked to the wall.

"I had a wonderful life before, and I have a wonderful life now," she says, pointing out pictures of grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Her family, she says, calls frequently and gathers regularly for the holidays. In the interim, she keeps herself busy at Chai House.

At 92, Silver shows no signs of slowing down. She still calls bingo at the twice-weekly games and works at the tenant-run convenience store on Fridays. She eats simple meals in her apartment during the day, and then joins the other residents for the nightly meal.

"Beats cooking," she jokes.

After dinner, Silver likes to watch game shows and read books from the Chai House library or swaps novels with the building's assistant manager, Barbara Eakins.

The majority of the residents are like Silver--able-bodied seniors with a good sense of humor, whose physical and mental health needs can be met during weekly visits by the nurses in training from San José State University or social workers from Jewish Family Services.

However, not all of the residents are elderly. Sharon Persich, 53, has had multiple sclerosis for the past 24 years.

Persich's mother, Harriet Saltzman, remembers her daughter as a spirited dietician before she was diagnosed at 29. As the illness progressed, Persich lived with her parents but wanted to live on her own, Saltzman says.

"When she came here, she was so happy," Saltzman says. "She was living independently."

Through her daughter and neighbor Epstein, Saltzman became involved with Chai House's board seven years ago. She became the board's president in 2004.

On the board, she helps address a number of concerns ranging from transportation to inviting a stylist to Chai House to have the residents' hair and nails done.

At the facility, Saltzman greets residents by name, knowing their histories and families. Watching the seniors move about the lobby and socialize, she says, "These people amaze me constantly."

Looking inward, she adds, "I know I'm going to get there someday, and I know I will want something like this."

Chai House is located at 814 St. Elizabeth Dr. For more information or to inquire about vacancies, call 408.947.1818.

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