

A “Hoot” for Nonagenarians Becomes a Media Sensation

Menorah Park Center for Senior Living, Beachwood, Ohio

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Sherry Gavanditti, Menorah Park



The “Women of Wiggins,” 10 residents of Wiggins Place on the Menorah Park campus who range in age from 89 to 97, grew up in an era when Jewish girls aged 12 to 14 were very rarely given the opportunity to become bat mitzvahs. So when Menorah Park Associate Rabbi Howard Kutner offered the ladies a chance to have their own bat mitzvah ceremony, they jumped at the challenge. As Millie Danziger Fromet, 90, said in *The New York Times* article on the women, “My first thought was boy, what a hoot!”

The bat mitzvah ceremony was held March 22 in the Jennie & Jacob Sapirstein Synagogue on the Menorah Park Campus.

The preparation and the event were certainly inspiring to the women, their families and the Menorah Park community, but the story has been picked up by media all over the U.S. Stories have appeared in *The New York Times* and many other newspapers. Television reports have appeared on CBS, ABC and Fox, and the story has even gone international with reports and interviews appearing on the BBC and in Israeli newspapers.

The story is compelling enough to have built its own momentum, but Menorah Park staff has helped it along, at first by aggressively promoting it to Cleveland-area media and then nationally (including outreach to the White House).

“The women started to prepare five to six months ahead of time with the rabbi,” says Sherry Gavanditti, Menorah Park PR and media specialist. “News releases went out in January; by February we started hearing from more media people, then there was another newsletter article in March. *The New York Times* getting involved was a big step.”

“The response has been amazing,” adds Gavanditti. “CBS news spent at least five hours talking to the women over two days. We’ve even heard from a literary agency wanting to talk about a book deal! Several are signing on with the agency, which has hired a writer to interview them and put together a proposal.”

After the ceremony, says Gavanditti, “They were all tired but had stars in their eyes and were glowing. They are proving that

you can do anything, at any age, if you put your heart and soul into it. It’s never too late.”

For links to media coverage for the bat mitzvah ladies, visit www.menorahpark.org.

Journey of Dreams Makes Elders’ Wishes a Call to Action

Wesley Village (United Methodist Homes), Shelton, Conn.

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For Mary Salce, 97, it was a ride in a hot-air balloon. For Angie Karlon, 101, it was a chance to be on television for the first time. For another resident, it was a remote-control car race to indulge her love for NASCAR. One resident’s love for Disneyland led to her care center’s



United Methodist Homes

The Journey of Dreams program at Wesley Village finds creative ways to help residents achieve lifelong desires. One of the most popular events was tethered hot-air balloon rides for 38 residents, inspired by the wishes of 97-year-old Mary Salce.

lobby being transformed into Disney’s Main Street USA.

Wesley Village’s Journey of Dreams program encourages residents to think positively about how they would like to live the next chapters of their lives. Residents can write down their dreams and deposit them in a “wishing well” installed in the lobby of the Crosby Commons assisted living community on the Wesley Village campus. The staff then creatively finds ways to make the dreams come true.

In some cases, such as the balloon rides (which eventually elevated 38 residents, including one centenarian) or the appearance on a local television news program, the seniors travel outside the community. In other cases, the home is transformed into a new world to celebrate a resident’s dream.

“The majority of the work [of] collecting the dreams is done by the recreation department,” says Julie Norko, associate director for development and public relations. “But the community itself really joins to make the dreams come true. [Staff] people want to make this work whether it’s part of their job descriptions or not.”

The program is in keeping with the Planetree Philosophy of person-centered care, to which Wesley Village subscribes. “The dreams happen because of the hard work of everybody on our campus,” says Norko. “They want the residents to feel like they can live the next chapters of their lives, as opposed to thinking, ‘I came here and my story ended.’” 🌟