



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

“Community Service”
by Benjamin Sternhell
June 17, 2006

When I first heard about all the things I had to do for this bar mitzvah, the only part I thought I’d enjoy was community service. I’d much rather do hard work that helps people than have to write a talk or a research paper.

I’d already done lots of different kinds of community service or social action work and I’d always liked it. I participated in the AIDSwalk with City Congregation at least three times and I marched in several anti-war and anti-Bush demonstrations with Mom. I’ve also helped with coat collections and the penny harvest, and with my old school I volunteered at a book collection project, where we helped sort thousands of books people had donated for libraries in poor schools. For tzedakah I plan to donate a portion of my bar mitzvah money to Doctors without Borders, an international group that provides medical care, vaccinations, and nutrition to people in poor countries around the world.

For City Congregation’s Social Action Day, one year we planted a garden outside a branch of the public library and another year we painted and cleaned up a park. And I always help set up and clean up—and serve food!—at our Shabbat dinners.

For my bar mitzvah, I decided to do volunteer work at my Grandma’s nursing home in Commack, Long Island, Gurwin Jewish Geriatric Center. I picked it because my Grandma was there and I visit a lot anyway. We were supposed to complete at least 13 hours for the bar mitzvah, but I’ve already done more than 50—and I don’t plan to stop.

My most regular job is to help the recreation staff run activities and transport the elderly people to and from the activities in their wheelchairs. At Gurwin almost everyone is in a wheelchair (or else in bed—but the people who can’t get up at all don’t come to activities). On Saturday mornings—and on Friday afternoons I don’t have school—I take people to Shabbat services. (They say they’re going to “shul.”) I really have to hurry to get everyone downstairs in time. I’m trying to learn how to wheel two wheelchairs at once!

It’s interesting to watch because it’s a pretty religious service—Gurwin is run by Orthodox rabbis—so of course it’s very different from anything we do here. The rabbi is up front chanting in Hebrew, surrounded by people in wheelchairs. Some of the men wear yarmulkes and some of the women wear lace on their heads. Some of the old people fall asleep during the service and lots have no idea what’s going on. Some come just for the food, grape juice and cake. But some who can still speak and read help read the prayers. One man kept stopping and choking, but he read the prayers in Hebrew.

My Grandma doesn’t come to these services because they’re too religious. “Feh!” she says.

In the afternoons I help run activities like trivia games and balloon volleyball and sometimes Grandma comes to those—but only because I’m running them. “Feh!” she says. “Why should I play volleyball?”

Some of the people in the nursing home have physical problems but are perfectly fine mentally. They can join the book club or the computer club or talk on the phone and watch TV. And a lot can't do anything at all, not even talk. They just lie around and look at you. Some of them smile a lot, but others cry and scream. The ones I spend the most time with are the ones like Grandma, who can talk and go to activities, but who are confused a lot of the time.

Most of them are scared and sad. Everyone just wants to go home.

Now that I've gotten to know the people on Grandma's floor, I feel that I can really help people personally. There's a woman named Shirley, for instance, who everyone avoids. When Grandma first moved to this floor, Shirley gave me—and Mom, and Aunt Emily—the creeps. She sits in one spot all day and yells, "Miss! Miss! Miss!" all day long. Most of the people who work there ignore her. But if you talk to her, she's a regular person. When you ask her what she wants, she says, "Stay with me."

Mom said to Shirley, "I know it's lonely," and Shirley said, "Yes, it's so lonely here" and she had tears in her eyes. So now I sit with Shirley and talk to her whenever I can. She still calls me "Miss," but she calls everyone "Miss."

Even though I'm not officially doing volunteer work in the evenings, sometimes I help move the residents out of the dining room after dinner. There aren't enough nurses or aides to do it.

I make sure Anna gets her cookies after dinner. I take Annette for a walk down the hall. I stop again to hold Shirley's hand.

When I was little Grandma got down on the floor and played board games with me. We always went shopping together, to Waldbaum's and King Kullen—lots of different stores, because one had a better deal on milk and one had better vegetables. I had my own room in Grandma and Grandpa's house in Rockville Centre.

Grandma could do everything then. She drove and shopped and cooked and did the *New York Times* crossword puzzle in ink. But after Grandpa died when I was 9, everything changed. We sold the house and Grandma moved into an assisted living community, also part of Gurwin. She couldn't drive or cook anymore, and she now walked with a walker, but she still played games with me in the community's game room. She still read books and played bridge and Scattergories—but after a couple of years, everything got too hard.

"I'm not myself," she says now. "I'm lost."

It's really depressing and horrible for Grandma, and for most of the other people at Gurwin, but I do what I can to make them feel better. Working at Gurwin is different from other community service projects I've done because I do it every week and know everyone personally. I feel much more useful doing this than when I've marched against AIDS or collected money or coats or food.

I understand how these people feel now that I've watched Grandma go through it. I understand that people like Shirley, and even Lee who just screams all the time and kind of snarls at you if you come near her, were once just regular people—women like Mom, and before that kids like me.

Life really is a cycle: you start out as a baby and—at least sometimes—end up like a baby again. Grandma used to take care of me, but now I have to take care of her.

In our family it was always a tradition to sign birthday cards “I love you infinity”—I learned the word infinity almost before I could count to ten. Grandma doesn’t sign cards anymore, but we still love each other infinity.

If she gets lost I’ll find her and push her wheelchair back to her room.