

JCCGCI'S Connect2 Program Brings Hope To Survivors

By BORUCH SHUBERT

For someone who survived the Holocaust, life is inevitably weighted with the burden of memories too horrific to recount. But when that person becomes elderly – and as too often happens – is left alone without daily emotional support, their ability to continue thriving as they once did becomes severely compromised. For many Holocaust survivors living in Brooklyn and Manhattan, however, Connect2, a friendly visiting program initiated in 2001 by the Jewish Community Council of Greater Coney Island, has significantly alleviated this plight. It is funded by a special grant from the Conference On Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

Connect2, which has provided over 5,000 friendly visits since its inception, makes contact with its senior clients through referrals by various communal organizations, and recruits its approximately 70 volunteers through announcements in schools, newspaper articles, and recommendations from Jewish organizations.



Leah Davidowitz, director of Connect2, visiting a Holocaust survivor client.

Each volunteer, who can range in age from high school student to retired adult, is matched with a survivor based on mutual compatibility in terms of personalities and interests. Visiting their new “friend” at home on a regular basis, the volunteer typically engages in meaningful conversation with the Holocaust survivor.

Seeking to enhance the life of the frail client, the volunteer is also likely to spend time reading to them, or help them take care of such simple, yet potentially daunting, tasks as making arrangements with a utility company or scheduling a doctor's appointment. According to Leah Davidowitz, the director of Connect2, the volunteers are taught, prior to beginning their visits, how to be acutely aware of their clients' specific needs, and how to be as respectful and courteous as possible.

“When a volunteer asks their client ‘Where can I sit?’ or ‘How would you like me to address you?’” she points out, “it gives the elderly survivor a sense of control. These little gestures can do wonders for someone whose anguished past and isolated present have diminished their pride and self-esteem.” Keeping its elderly clientele in mind between home visits as well, Connect2 sends out special mailings to them in conjunction with Jewish holidays, generally a greeting card and a timely gift such as a bottle of honey for *Rosh Hashanah* or chocolates for *Chanukah*. Faced with an increasing number of clients, Davidowitz says that she is looking for more volunteers to meet the demand. “Thanks to the tireless direction of Leah Davidowitz, Connect2 continues to grow as a model program of its kind,” says Rabbi Moshe Wiener, executive director, Jewish Community Council of Greater Coney Island.