

A Joyful Song of a Time Gone By

by Samantha Renzulli

He was a jaded man, short in stature, thin, the skin on the back of his hands sagging from his frail bones. In passing, he was barely distinguishable from a crowd, his faded clothing clung to his thin frame, and his bandaged legs propped up by the metal of his wheelchair revealed his age. I walked in, and this is what I saw. I saw an elderly man, perhaps a grandfather or a husband. I saw a man with more summers behind him than in front of him. I saw a man who I assumed wouldn't even remember his own name, let alone mine by the end of our weekly session together. His legs were bandaged and his silver hair stuck out at odd angles. His glasses dropped to the tip of his nose, while his eyes slowly scanned the room, and beneath them was a wide, goofy, lopsided grin. This is all I saw when I first walked in. I only needed 2 minutes to see that this was not the case, for this is not the man I grew to understand, and not the man I walked out knowing.

I wonder what others see of him, if not the same man I just described. When I first walked into the JSS, or what I know as The Jewish Home, I saw a janitor mopping the floor, a secretary typing on a keyboard, nurses rushing or pushing the wheelchairs of others, and I wonder if they see the same old man I first saw, or, if they truly got to know him, and saw him as I had after our time together. Had I seen him in the grocery store, or quickly out of the corner of my eye, I wouldn't have glanced twice, kept my head down and continued at my steady pace. But this intergenerational program at Merkaz, allowed me to see him for who he is, not for his physical features.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once expressed: "Many people die with their music still in them. Too often it is because they are always getting ready to live...Before they know it...time runs out." Everyone in the Jewish Home has music within them, stories to be heard, and our mission when visiting them was to listen to them, so they don't die with stories unheard and memories not shared. The man I just described was named David, not Mr. or Dr. anything to me, he was just David. And I was there to help him present his music to the world before his time runs out. When I met him for the first time, I was concerned that the barrier between us of our ages and life experiences would be too great to overcome and we would not be able to honestly get to know each other; however, I was quickly proven wrong. I had been mere seconds away from not being able to attend Merkaz that night, for my mock trial team had our first competition in New Haven. I had come home on a sweaty school bus after two hours in court, and the last thing I wanted to do was put on a half-hearted smile and go to the JSS. But I decided to go, I'm not sure why, but I'm forever grateful that I did, for, by the end of the night, my smile, and my heart, was nothing less than full.

The night I visited him was just a few days before Hanukkah, and our program was to construct a menorah out of legos. As I was arriving late due to my mock trial competition, when I walked in, already many teens were paired up and working with many of the elderly adults. So, when my teacher told me David was alone without anyone to work with, I quickly jogged across the room to join him. Little did I know the conversation we would get into would be one that would stick with me for weeks to come. When I first introduced myself, his voice was soft, almost undetectable, and I had to lean in to understand him. However, what started out as short and albeit slightly uncomfortable small talk, lead to a conversation about some topics which I had not even discussed with my own friends. I told him

why I was late, coming from New Haven courthouse and competing for the Fairfield Warde High School mock trial team and this quickly opened a door of conversation. While gathering white and blue legos for our menorah, David explained that he had grown up in New Haven, became a lawyer after college, and raised his kids in Fairfield, sending them to Fairfield Warde back when it was the only high school in Fairfield. I was shocked at how much of the information I had shared was relevant in his own life. He then proceeded to talk about his kids, and about what they loved about Warde, and then asked me, what my favorite subject is school was. I was unable to decide which subject I enjoyed most, so I told him this, and then mentioned my love for books and good literature. I then told him about the books I had been reading for school and my opinions on their messages, and about books I was reading independently from school. One of the books I mentioned discussed a very controversial idea of fraud in the medical community based on racism in the early 1900s, and he chimed in to offer input and his opinion on what I had shared. He mentioned one of his favorite books, a book about Thomas Jefferson, and this led to another conversation about our shared interest in history and what we knew and felt about America's Revolutionary War. When talking with David, I lost track of time, so genuinely intrigued by what he had to say, that I just stopped what I was doing to listen and to talk. We all have our music within us, we all have our own songs to sing. With Merkaz, I have had the chance to hear his music, his story, and not let it go unheard, and I am forever glad I was able to help him share his music with the world.

Perhaps others see him as an old man or defined by his frail appearance. Perhaps if you saw this man, you would see that too. I know this was what my initial perception was but it is not anymore. Yes, David was an older man, a man of another generation. His eyes wandered around the room searching for someone to share his knowledge with, glassy and mysterious to the naked eye, preserving his gentle spirit until someone dares walk up, look into his mysterious eyes, and listens. So on a day like no other, when I could very well have just stayed home, I listened; to his music, his stories, and his memories. I even shared some of my own. And as I did, he smiled back, kind and bright, welcoming me into his own world, until the end of the night when I had to say goodbye. But it was not my final goodbye, for I knew I would be back, talking to David about our shared interests, about our lives, families and weeks. I believe that the time we spent together could not be mirrored in my time at home, or anywhere else for that matter. To me, nothing is more precious than the time we have, and to share it with others, because we *all* have the power to make someone's life so much brighter, and all it takes is time out of our busy schedules, to walk up to someone who we may otherwise just pass by, and to listen, and to smile.

