

ONE-ON-ONE WITH AVIVA SAAD

U-T profiles of notable local people

Bringing laughter, support to older adults

BY LISA DEADERICK ■ PHOTO BY K.C. ALFRED

There are a lot of things Aviva Saad has learned during her years of working with older adults with Alzheimer's and dementia: She's learned about the role music and laughter play in helping her clients, continuing her education to better serve the people she's creating programs and community for, and how to navigate the many losses that occur because of the nature of her work.

As coordinator of the Balboa Avenue Older Adult Center, one of Jewish Family Service of San Diego's Social & Wellness Centers, she's responsible for planning and organizing the center's daily activities, supporting family members and caregivers, and caring for those being served by the center. Part of JFS' Alzheimer's Disease Initiative developed with Alzheimer's San Diego, the center currently serves 60 members, four days a week, with activities and transportation options. Her work has resulted in an expansion of the services offered and provided over the years, and her recognition as a Miztvah Award honoree at the 2018 JFS Heart & Soul Gala.

Saad, 57, lives in Scripps Ranch with her husband, Joseph, and they have two adult children. She took some time to discuss her work at the center and what she's learned about creating and providing services to people with Alzheimer's and dementia, and their families.

Q. Tell us about the Balboa Older Adult Center.

A. When the Balboa Avenue Older Adult Center opened 18 years ago, Jewish Family Service saw the growth of the senior population in the Golden Triangle and decided to open a center in University City. The center was a two-day-a-week program where older adults exercised, socialized, had lectures, and ate a kosher meal.

Twelve years ago, when I was hired to lead the center, I realized the people served were cognitively and mentally frail. The needs of the community were changing: Spouses, children, caregivers and family members were struggling with the care of their loved ones who suffered with dementia or Alzheimer's. It was then that the programming of the center changed and became a dementia-friendly program, a place where seniors with or without dementia or Alzheimer's could spend four hours of their day stimulating their brains, bodies and spirits. It became a safe place that families impacted by the disease could trust with the care of their loved ones.

In October 2016, the center moved to Jewish Family Service's Joan & Irwin Jacobs Campus in Kearny Mesa and became known as the Balboa Avenue Older Adult Center.

Q. Why did you want to work at the center in this capacity?

A. I love working with older adults, and I love planning and organizing activities. One of my family members had Alzheimer's, and I did not like the few programs and resources that were available to him in San Diego. I wanted to make a difference in the community and create a unique program that would offer people with dementia a place where they could be who they are, be treated with compassion, respect and dignity, and have four hours of enriching and empowering activities designed just for them. I wanted to build a place where they could feel proud of who they were and spend their days filled with laughter, love, and friendship. Leading the center and working for JFS gave me the opportunity and resources to learn and create the much-needed program that would change the lives of so many people struggling with the disease.

Q. In your experience of working with older adults with Alzheimer's and dementia, what have you learned that you think would be helpful for others to know?

A. People with Alzheimer's and dementia are still able to enjoy life! They are

still living; they have feelings; they want to be loved, respected, and to have a purpose in their lives. People need to be empathetic and should try to connect with the person with Alzheimer's in a kind, positive and respectful way to bring the best out of them. Do not be afraid of doing something wrong. Just do. Be there for them, be present, engage and connect. People with Alzheimer's may forget what they ate or what they did that day, but they won't forget how we made them feel.

Q. What have you learned about creating programs at the center to engage the older adults you work with?

A. I have learned that music and laughter are the best cure for every human being. Music is the international language of the heart and mind. I hire excellent

musicians who entertain every day at the center and transform it into the best club in town, where members are encouraged to dance, clap, sing, and laugh.

Every single person needs a purpose in life. That is why I try to learn who each person is — and used to be — in order to give them the opportunity to feel productive and special. People with dementia or Alzheimer's know they are not the same as before, and they are suffering lots of changes in their lives. They worry: They are sometimes sad or depressed and fear for their future, so they need a safe place where they are understood. I learned to always observe behaviors, keep an eye on every participant, and make sure they are safe and well cared for.

Q. You were named a Miztvah Award honoree at the 2018 JFS Heart & Soul Gala. What is a Miztvah? And what did it mean to you to be recognized in this way?

A. A Miztvah is, most simply, a good deed.

When JFS chose me to be an honoree, I was humbled to experience so much love, respect, admiration and appreciation from my colleagues, clients, friends, community members and family. To know that I have impacted so many lives reaffirmed how fortunate I am to be able to pursue my passion of working with people with Alzheimer's and dementia.

Often, when we die, people come together to honor us and celebrate our life. I had the amazing opportunity to experience that while being alive. It was a blessing to see, hear and feel the love and gratitude of all the people who have been im-

acted by our program at the center.

Working for JFS has given me the opportunity to grow, perform a lot of mitzvahs, and make this world a better place. To be recognized by the place where I work, and the community, as a Miztvah honoree was one of my life achievements.

Q. What's been challenging about your work?

A. The losses that I experience every day. Working with frail, older adults who are living with Alzheimer's and dementia means experiencing loss constantly: loss of memories, loss of abilities, loss of words, loss of feelings, and ultimately, the loss of life. I never know what the next minute brings, which is why I live and focus on the present and treasure every experience I have with my members. They are all special gifts.

Q. What's been rewarding about this work?

A. The most rewarding part of my job is knowing that I am able to bring the best out of every person who participates in the center. Every day, little miracles happen. To see a member smile, laugh, enjoy themselves, connect with others, connect with themselves, and recall special moments in their lives makes me so happy and fulfilled. I love to hear when family members observe positive changes in their loved ones and thank me for giving them the respite they need. To see the program volunteers (both children and adults) connect, empathize, and love their time volunteering at the center, also makes me very proud.

Q. What has this work taught you about yourself?

A. That I can be anything I want to bring a smile and laughter to my members. Every day, I become a comedian, an exercise teacher, a dancer, a singer (with a terrible voice!) and an entertainer. I will do anything to bring the best out of people.

Q. What is the best advice you've ever received?

A. That we have to treat each day as our last day and make the best of it. We have to express our love and gratitude to every single person in our lives because we never know when it might be our last day in this beautiful world.

Q. What is one thing people would be surprised to find out about you?

A. Nothing. I am an open book! Everybody knows me for who I am: an honest, happy, empathetic, kind, energetic, LOUD and straight-forward person. I like to express my opinions, and everybody knows exactly where I stand.

Q. Describe your ideal San Diego weekend.

A. My weekends are very special. I like to spend them with my husband, or my children when they come for a visit. Often, my husband and I will spend the morning going for a walk at Balboa Park or Coronado, then have breakfast or lunch in town. After that, we'll go home and I'll garden, then enjoy my afternoon reading in my backyard, listening to the birds singing and the wind blowing.

lisa.deaderick@uniointribune.com

What I love about Scripps Ranch ...

I have lived in Scripps Ranch for 32 years. It is a quiet, family-oriented neighborhood, and the weather is always perfect. It also has a lot of natural beauty with Miramar Lake and various other parks and trails.

