

# Help with the Challenges of Aging

JANET MENDELSON writer

**with aging** comes the unforeseen. Some older adults are strong and healthy while others develop chronic illness or cognitive decline. Not income, education, or where we call home can protect us from what's meant to be. It can feel overwhelming for caregivers and their partners or elderly parents alike. Fortunately, no one has to forge a path alone.

Services for Older Adults, a division of Jewish Family & Children's Service (JF&CS) in Waltham, helps thousands of people each year—including those living in Wellesley and Weston—through programs designed to improve quality of life and help solve problems associated with aging. These include Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease and related dementias, and loss and grief. The staff includes more than 20 professionals with master's degrees in social work, counseling, or allied health degrees.

Founded in 1850 by immigrants who settled in Boston, JF&CS today serves people of all ages throughout eastern and central Massachusetts. Services for Older Adults, the second largest division, is available to all, regardless of faith. The service even has contracts with two orders of nuns. Other JF&CS divisions focus on parenting, and individuals with disabilities or experiencing illness, poverty, hunger, or domestic abuse.

Your Elder Experts (YEE) is their aging life care management service guiding older adults and their families through the complexities and challenges of aging well. It's a place to start for a one-time consultation, crisis management, or ongoing, day-to-day care.

"People who receive help with care management have fewer hospitalizations and less anxiety," says Karen Wasserman, director of YEE since it was created 22 years ago. "We have the specialized expertise to connect clients to a vast array of services for almost seamless coverage. Together we can create an individualized plan and make it happen."

A one-time consultation and assessment might identify the need for appropriate housing options or make a recommendation for homecare services and connections to local community resources. Depending on individual interests and abilities, the plan might include arts and exercise groups or support groups.



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## Help with the Challenges of Aging

YEE can also match clients with an expert to lessen the burdens of a challenging time. As a private pay service, on an hourly basis, a care manager can find and interview homecare aides, coordinate medical appointments, or accompany clients on doctor visits as another pair of ears. They can be a health-care advocate, assist with a move, arrange respite breaks for the caregiver, and much more.

I wish I'd known all this during the many years my mother lived with dementia before she died at age 98. As her condition declined, my sister and I did our best to make medical and housing decisions for her, guided by instructions she gave us long ago. But we didn't always know what to do. We made mistakes. We have regrets.

"None of us have chosen these roles we're in," says Marcia Spraker-Cavallo, who knows what this difficulty is like. Her husband, Vin Cavallo, has Parkinson's disease and dementia. As a retired clinical nurse specialist, she knows even professionals can't always easily find programs to benefit community-dwelling older adults. "But at JF&CS," she says, "it was one-stop shopping."

Kathy Burnes, division director, told me Services for Older Adults assists upwards of 2,000 people a year. "Aging happens to all of us, regard-

less of our ethnicity, race, or other factors," says Kathy. "But only a small percentage of people plan ahead, particularly around health and well-being, especially for major—and unexpected—conditions. Rarely are all family members on the same page at the same time when major life decisions need to happen. It's human nature. What we do best," says Kathy, "is help people connect."

For Marcia Spraker-Cavallo, those connections began about six years ago when she first attended JF&CS's Parkinson's education programs. From physicians and other professionals she learned what to expect as her husband's condition progresses and how

*top, background: Aging Well at Home enables older adults to live with dignity and purpose in their own homes and communities; top: Your Elder Experts team members work to enhance older adults' quality of life; bottom left and right: CJP Senior Direct eldercare professionals connect you and your family with the resources and advice you need.*



## Help with the Challenges of Aging

to plan financially. Then she joined a Parkinson's support group for caregivers. Her husband joined a Parkinson's dance group and the Tremble Clefs Choir.

"Vin is a jazz musician and we've always loved to dance," Marcia shares. "Those groups early on stimulated him to start playing clarinet again. The choir director pushes participants to use their vocal chords, which was so good for him, helping with



## Jewish Family & Children's Service (JF&CS)

Waltham headquarters (several locations)  
781.647.JFCS (5327); Monday-Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.  
[www.jfcsboston.org](http://www.jfcsboston.org)

### Services for Older Adults

- YOUR ELDER EXPERTS ([www.yourelDERexperts.com](http://www.yourelDERexperts.com))
- AGING AND MENTAL HEALTH TRAINING FOR HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS
- AGING WELL AT HOME
- ALZHEIMER'S/RELATED DISORDERS FAMILY SUPPORT
- MASSACHUSETTS MEMORY CAFÉ DIRECTORY ([www.jfcsboston.org/MemoryCafeDirectory](http://www.jfcsboston.org/MemoryCafeDirectory))
- BETTY ANN GREENBAUM MILLER CENTER FOR JEWISH HEALING
- GROUP ADULT FOSTER CARE
- GUARDIANSHIP
- CHARLOTTE AND RICHARD OKONOW PARKINSON'S FAMILY SUPPORT
- SCHECHTER HOLOCAUST SERVICES FOR SURVIVORS
- SUICIDE PREVENTION



*left: Members of a Parkinson's dance group; right: Parkinson's Tremble Clef Choir; bottom, background: The Dementia Friends program is available in a variety of languages.*

speech. Right before the pandemic, they told us to choose music that Vin could remember because of memories he attached to it. JF&CS recorded dozens of his favorite jazz and Great American Songbook classics on a disk and gave him a player with headphones so he can listen at home. He's unable to tell me what he feels but I can see that it helps. I'm bowled over by their creativity and responsiveness to his needs"

Marcia and Vin, a former priest, met in a bereavement support group more than 22 years ago, both having experienced loss. This time she found a group for partners of people with Parkinson's. They understand what it means to lose a loved one to dementia long before they die.

"They help me feel I'm not alone," Marcia notes. "Barbara Sternfeld, the leader, is exceptional in her handling of the multiple emotions of the participants." Marcia listened as they talked about their struggles trying to manage at home.

"As a nurse, I knew what was coming but I had to hear it for myself," she says. "I'm 76. I wouldn't be able to maintain my house without Vin's help. And my time and energy need to be directed toward caring for Vin, not raking leaves. So we sold our house and moved to an all-ages condo community with indoor parking. We can age in place and Vin no longer has to worry about stairs."

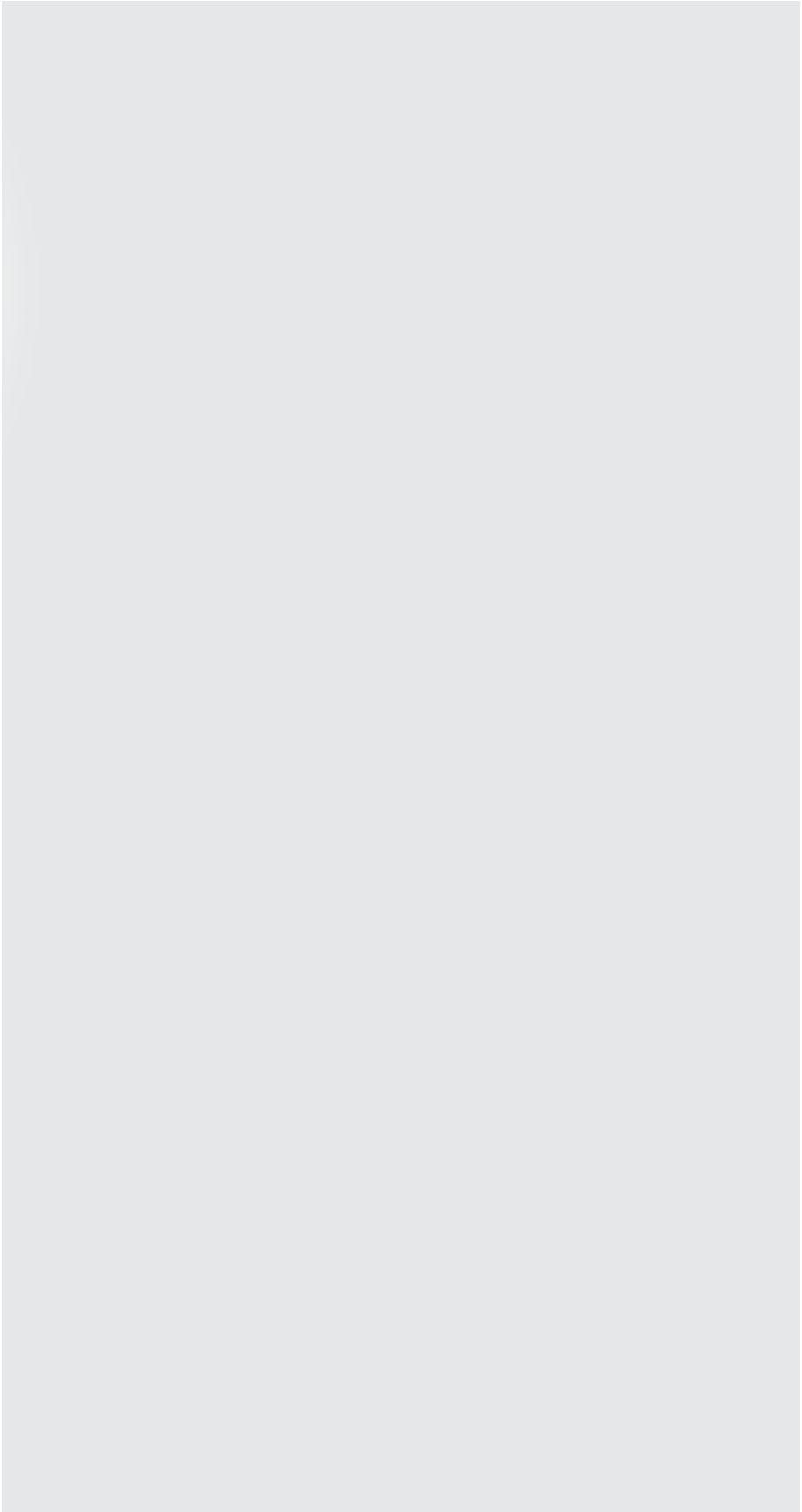


She hired a YEE care manager who has helped her find services when Vin needs palliative care, as well as urgent care, at home. Marcia says, “I can’t thank Jewish Family & Children’s Service enough for what they’ve done for me, especially throughout the pandemic.”

Former Wellesley residents Shirley Quinn and her son, Andrew, needed a different kind of help.

“It was Mom’s idea entirely,” says Andrew Quinn. “She’s 98 years old. We are the only family each of us has, and I live 500 miles away in Washington, DC. Mom is mentally sharp. She looked over the horizon a long time ago and for her own peace of mind felt that we both needed a local specialist who can act as a stand-in for family in emergency situations and keep the older adult and family up to speed with medical care.”

The Quinn family moved to Wellesley in 1962. Shirley Quinn’s YEE care manager,



## Help with the Challenges of Aging



*JF&CS is making the international awareness program Dementia Friends available in Massachusetts.*

Susan Bernat, happens to be a former neighbor, although she didn't know Andrew well. "Now we're in tandem helping my Mom," he says. "Susan can look over Mom's prescription list to see if anything looks odd, not to second guess the doctors but just ask questions." She can arrange for medical transport or go with her to medical appointments.

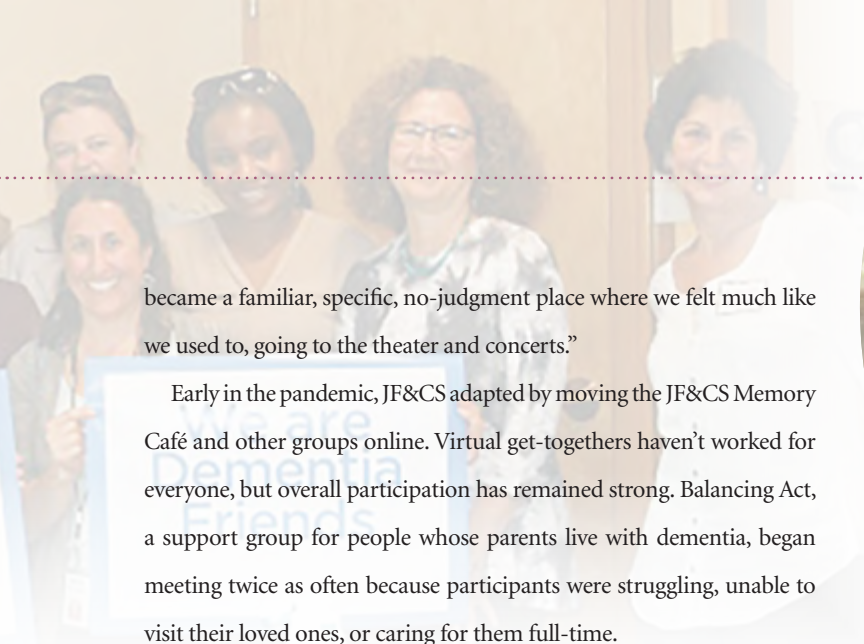
"In 2020, when Mom fell and broke her hip, we hadn't spoken to Susan in a year, and we needed immediate help," Andrew says. "She was there when I couldn't be, and then sourced the walker and other equipment Mom needed." Shirley Quinn has since moved to a retirement community in Needham. Her foresight and Bernat's ongoing care have given her son peace of mind, too.

Sam Ellenport used to circle the date in red on the calendar so he and his late wife, Avril, wouldn't miss the JF&CS Memory Café. For a year and a half, they attended

nearly every one of the monthly social gatherings for people with Alzheimer's and related disorders and their care partners.

"Avril tried low impact exercises classes for people with Parkinson's but especially enjoyed the JF&CS Memory Café," he said. "What she liked was getting out of the house. I thought it would be just another chore, but I was surprised. I enjoyed it! Beth Soltzberg (the director) and the volunteers, including Brandeis students, made everyone feel welcome, guiding us to tables and nearby snacks.

"My wife was English, so I'd make her a cup of tea while there were always friendly people to talk to her. Every month there's a different activity or musical entertainment. Right before Christmas, 30 of us had an indoor snowball fight with cotton balls," Sam recalls. "It was ridiculous and fun! The JF&CS Memory Café



became a familiar, specific, no-judgment place where we felt much like we used to, going to the theater and concerts.”

Early in the pandemic, JF&CS adapted by moving the JF&CS Memory Café and other groups online. Virtual get-togethers haven’t worked for everyone, but overall participation has remained strong. Balancing Act, a support group for people whose parents live with dementia, began meeting twice as often because participants were struggling, unable to visit their loved ones, or caring for them full-time.

For over 20 years, aging and mental health has been another focus for JF&CS, especially for individuals living in senior housing or the community and at risk for eviction or suicide. Loneliness imposed by COVID-19 has further increased mental health concerns.

In 2020 alone, JF&CS ran 130 online training workshops attended by 3,000 providers specializing in aging. As leaders in the international Memory Café movement, they also organized two emergency idea exchanges with up to 170 people across the U.S.

*top, background: Dementia Friends trains volunteer “Champions” who offer information sessions in their communities; top: JF&CS’s Memory Cafe offers social gatherings for people with Alzheimer’s and related disorders and their care partners; bottom: Dementia Friends workshop participants.*



At some point in our lives, we’ll all be confronted with making decisions on behalf of people we love who are getting older and need more care. Knowing where to find help and resources can make a significant difference in how we manage the challenges. [WW](#)

