

The RIVERDALE PRESS

February 19, 2009

Nostalgia can be good for you, especially if you sing along

by Kevin Deutsch

Edith Fiebach was gravely ill, fading away in an intensive care unit, when the music came back to her. In her hospital bed, she hummed the ballads she adored as a teenager in Flatbush. In her imagination, she was right back on her front stoop giggling and singing with her girlfriends.

“I was not expected to live,” said Ms. Fiebach, 87, who went through the medical crisis a little over a year ago. “It was music — those memories — that brought me back to life.”

For seniors like Ms. Fiebach at The Hebrew Home at Riverdale, music has become an integral part of their efforts to improve memory and stay sharp, busy and mentally healthy. Each Wednesday, they’re treated to a jazz for seniors class presented by professional musician and Riverdalian Robert Silverman.

The class is a fusion of jazz appreciation, history, and just plain fun, with participants singing along to classic songs many have not heard since their teens or 20s. The sounds of Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw flood the hall, taking the seniors back to their glory days.

“Jazz makes them feel good,” said Mr. Silverman, who has seven albums to his credit and was formerly the music and jazz director at The Dwight School. “They used to dance to this music, and it brings back all those good memories.”

Last Wednesday, Mr. Silverman played recordings of songs by Thelonious Monk and Billie Holliday, then performed his own renditions on piano while the class sang along.

For Bella Schupak, 91, the music reminded her of how she would wait in line at Woolworth to buy song sheets — containing lyrics of popular hits — in Brooklyn when she was young.

“This is what we lived for,” Ms. Schupak said.

She recalled, too, how she and her friends would dance to some of those same songs at the synagogue socials of her girlhood.

When Silverman showed footage of couples doing the Lindy Hop and remarked how difficult it looked, Ms. Schupak said she could hop with the best of them.

“We were young once,” Ms. Schupak said. “We could really move.”

Mr. Silverman, who works for the Hebrew Home and also plays with his band at clubs around New York City, likes to spread knowledge and appreciation of jazz. In a group of jazz-savvy seniors, he’s found the perfect audience.

“They have enthusiasm for the music and an appreciation gained from growing up with it,” Mr. Silverman said, adding that his class has a taste for the faster, high-energy jazz they listened to in their youth. “They wanted to move, just like the kids today want to move.”

Sometimes, Mr. Silverman’s students even educate him.

“You can’t play down to this crowd,” he said. “They grooved in their own way.” ■



Robert Silverman, a self-taught jazz pianist and classically-trained trumpeter, conducts a weekly jazz course at the Hebrew Home for the Aged at Riverdale, incorporating activities and singing in each course. Bella Schupa, 91, with lyric sheet in center, and Sylvia Tuchinsky, right, join in singing the 1941 Billie Holiday and Arthur Herzog Jr. tune “God Bless the Child.”

Photo by Karsten Moran