

A Milestone: Leonard Florence Center for Living Celebrates 10 Years of Helping Others

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by Seth Daniel • February 27, 2020

It was freezing cold 10 years ago this month, and few at the brand new Leonard Florence Center for Living (LFCFL) knew what they were doing or how their risk in providing an innovative, new care model to those with ALS and MS would turn out.



**Chelsea Jewish Lifecare
CEO Barry Berman speaks about the
early days of the organization**

Most said it was crazy; even more said not to do it.

But 10 years ago this month, several employees and administrators from Chelsea Jewish Lifecare set out to create what would become a worldwide model for residential care to those suffering with the debilitating ALS disease. Now, with a fully automated building and a new thought-process in caring for residents, many lives have been improved.

That milestone and the achievement were celebrated on Monday afternoon, Feb. 24, at LFCFL – where many of the original employees were celebrated and six of the 10 original residents happily gave testimony as to how much better their lives have been.



**Chelsea Jewish Lifecare
President Adam Berman**

In a nutshell, the risk was full of reward.

“It’s hard to believe 10 years ago 10 employees and five residents from Chelsea Jewish Nursing Home set out to create what we have come to build here,” said COO Betsy Mullen. “It was such a cold day. It was really an adventure into the unknown because none of us, residents or families knew what life would be like in an urban Green House. There was no pattern or no model...Then once we got settled here, all of the residents wanted to go outside and watch the snow coming down on the new porch and feel the snow on their skin. It was something they hadn’t felt for a long time. It was a special time.”

CEO Barry Berman, who helped lead the push for the Green House model, said no one advised him that this gamble was a good idea.

“Everyone told us this would never work,” he said. “We were told over and over again not to do this. Ten years later, look at what we have here. You have Steve Saling who has been here 13 years, and was one of the first. It’s truly, truly amazing. I’m truly happy to have just played some role in this process.”

Long-time resident Bonnie Berthiame said she went to the hospital one day after not feeling so good, and that turned into a long-term stay in the hospital and then a nursing home.

At the traditional nursing home, she said her life felt taken away, and her grandchildren didn't want to come.

"At the nursing home, the children were nervous when they sat on the bed and they cried," she said. "I felt sad, but understood. Now they don't want to leave when they come here and they don't cry. They're happy to see me. There, I opened my eyes and was thankful. Here, I open my eyes and I'm happy. It's given me back the life that the other nursing home took."

One of the most celebrated residents, Steve Saling, helped to design the LFCFL and make it into a fully automated building – with perks such as being able to control things with the blink of an eye, literally.

"The Leonard Florence has changed what it means to live with a chronic disease," he said. "Thank you for giving my life back to me when ALS had thought it had taken it from me."

Saling was an architect, and he actually helped design the Center after he was diagnosed with ALS. He was originally given a life span of two-five years. Twelve years later, he is able to spend time with his family, travel, go skiing, sailing and even skydiving.

The LFCFL is so noted because it features state-of-the-art kitchens, spacious dining rooms and fireplace living rooms for every 10 rooms. While traditional nursing homes rely upon one central kitchen to prepare food for the entire facility. The aroma of freshly cooked food reinforces the home concept. Each of the 100 spacious private rooms sport floor to ceiling windows and baths with showers. Residents have choices of what they eat – and when they eat it. Gathering spaces include a New York style deli, salon, spa, chapel, cafe, bakery, library and beautifully landscaped outdoor patio.

What's also unique: This revolutionary residence includes 30 rooms devoted to individuals diagnosed with ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) and MS (multiple sclerosis.) Many of the residents are completely immobilized, but through cutting-edge technology, are able to control lights, turn on the TV, call for the elevator, open doors and raise window shades, all with help of a computer and sensor that tracks head and eye movements for instruction. Today, the award-winning Center cares for more individuals living with ALS than any place else in the world.

Six ALS and MS residents who moved into the building in 2010 continue to call the Center their home.

"There is a tremendous need for these homes," said Barry Berman. "We get calls from families all over the world whose loved ones have been diagnosed with ALS or MS. Our vision is to open more homes to help individuals living with these debilitating diseases."

Notably, 40 employees have worked at the Leonard Florence Center since it opened in 2010. The group was honored at the anniversary celebration, with each employee receiving a special plaque. Additionally, they will be treated to an all-day outing in the coming month.

"This is an extraordinary milestone," said Adam Berman, president of Chelsea Jewish Lifecare. "Continuity of care is an important factor in creating a nurturing and compassionate environment. In reality, our employees are the very essence of the Leonard Florence Center. They make a huge difference in the day-to-day lives of our residents."