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Chai House celebrates 20 years of being a home

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Rosalyn "Roz" Silver was hurting. Four years after she and her husband moved to California from New York in 1975 to be with her grandchildren, her 38-year-old son died while jogging. In 1982, she lost her husband.

Then, with doctor bills looming and rent rates increasing, Silver was struggling to make ends meet. While working at the Jewish Community Center in Los Gatos, she heard about a low-income senior community, Chai House, that was opening in San Jose. So she applied.

Twenty years later, she still calls the Chai House home.

"God was very good to me," Silver, 92, says. "I love the Chai House. It's wonderful." Silver is one of the first residents to have moved in to the home, located at 814 St. Elizabeth Drive.

On Sunday, March 5, Chai House celebrated its 20th anniversary. Santa Clara County Supervisor Jim Beall and San Jose City Councilman Ken Yeager attended the event, honoring Chai House and all those who have worked to make it a success.

Chai House is the only one of its kind in Santa Clara County, and one of only six senior housing complexes run under Jewish auspices in the Bay Area. It offers 140 studio, one- and two-bedroom apartments for seniors and disabled adults. It provides residency to both Jews and non-Jews of low-to-moderate incomes. Chai House board President Harriet Saltzman says that about 60 percent of the residents are Jewish.

"We have been creating an attractive and life-affirming senior residential community for 20 years," Saltzman says. "Our name — Chai — means life, and that's exactly what we are celebrating."

Chai House opened in 1985. Lee Axelrad, a founder and former president of the project, "busted her buns" to get it up and running, says board member Bert Epstein. Her biggest challenge was finding ways to fund it.

Axelrad came up with the idea of having two facilities, although they would both be connected: The Department of Housing and Urban Development would sponsor one unit and the other would be sponsored by the Chai House.

The first phase, the HUD units, was completed Dec. 1, 1985. Phase two was completed just one year later.

Besides offering classes and providing medical services, Chai House boasts another important feature — a kosher kitchen, and has from almost the beginning. But Epstein says he remembers a time when kosher meals were a lot harder to come by.

"I was here when they were starting to put the kosher kitchen together," Epstein, 85, says. "At that

time, the food was being prepared in San Francisco, and we would drive there to bring the meals here.”

Since the kosher kitchen was installed nearly 19 years ago, dinner has been prepared there for the residents every day.

While there have been changes throughout the years — a longer waiting list for the housing, a demolition of the K-Mart across from the facility where many seniors did their shopping, the donation of a pool table — one thing has remained the same.

“The basic principle of having a facility for the elderly and having it run by the Jewish community,” Epstein says, “has always been and always will be the philosophy here.”

Silver moved to Chai House in 1986, and lives in the same one-bedroom apartment that she chose 20 years ago in the HUD unit. “It’s a safe and comfortable place,” she says.

Her apartment, she adds, is perfect for her. With a collage of her grandchildren posted on the walls and an apartment that is conveniently located on the first floor, Silver says that she had the luxury of choosing where she wanted to live. Now that the waiting list is so long, however, residents don’t have that option.

For residents like Silver, Chai House is not just a home, but a community. Silver, who says she abhors gossip and will only watch “Jeopardy” and “Wheel of Fortune” on her 30-year-old TV, keeps herself busy with activities in the house.

Whether it’s reading, running the bingo games with the new electronic bingo board, or operating the 814 Store, which sells everything from sodas to clothes, Silver has good reason to call it her home.

“I love this place,” Silver says, “because to me, it’s a haven.”