

Lilly Gottlieb gives yet another gift

By Abigail Klein Leichman

6–7 minutes

Lilly Gottlieb used to joke that she was a professional refugee.

Born in Austria in 1925, she was blown by the winds of war to Belgium, France, Morocco, Cuba, and finally America. She raised a family in Mountainside and volunteered as president of Jewish Family Services of Central New Jersey and as chair of a committee for the resettlement of Russian Jews.

“My mother had to start again many times, and there were no agencies to help her back then,” her son Michael said. “So she was naturally attracted to something that could help people in times of trouble.”

Almost to the day since Ms. Gottlieb died 20 years ago, the service organization that she helped to build into one of the largest JFS agencies in New Jersey has added \$485,000 to its coffers through the sale of a 78-acre plot of land in Tewksbury donated by her children — Michael “Mickey” Gottlieb and Peter Gottlieb — and their first cousins, Eric, Renee, and Dan Harvitt.

This is one of largest gifts the agency has ever received.

Mickey Gottlieb and Eric Harvitt, who helped build the Elizabeth headquarters of JFS Central NJ and sit on its board, are principals in the real-estate development firm Landmark Companies.

They agreed to tell the deeply personal story behind their gift in the hope of inspiring others to donate property toward a worthy cause.

The hilly parcel in Huntington County was part of a larger dairy farm that their grandparents established upon their arrival in the 1950s from a stateless persons camp in Munich after the war.

Mr. Gottlieb’s grandfather, Emil, and Mr. Harvitt’s grandmother, Amalia, had each suffered the death of their first spouse in the early years of the Nazi reign of terror. They each brought a son to the marriage – Ziggy Gottlieb and Eddie Harvitt. Ziggy’s children and Eddie’s children grew up around the corner from each other in Mountainside.

Mr. Harvitt and Mr. Gottlieb explained that their families weren’t trained as farmers. “They thought they were going to hire peasants to work it, like back in Poland, and found out that they were the peasants,” Mr. Harvitt said with a laugh.

In the 1960s, their grandparents pioneered the family’s evolution into real estate development by building and selling single-family homes on the more level parts of the farmland.

The five cousins debated what to do with the remaining piece of land after their fathers died. Ultimately, they decided to donate it to the agency.

“We’ve had longstanding ties to Jewish Family Service,” Mr. Gottlieb said. Like his mother, he also is a past president of the agency.

“Given that connection, donating the land seemed like an appropriate thing to do, a sort of a legacy for my mother and father and Eric’s family. We’re in a position where we can do it, and we got a very nice charitable deduction. It’s similar to donating appreciated stock.”

The result is a win-win-win situation: The donors get a tax write-off, the agency gets the profits, and the land will be preserved, undeveloped, as per the purchaser’s wishes.

JFS-Central NJ Executive Director Tom Beck said the nearly half-million dollars will help the agency continue offering 17 core services that assist about 10,000 people every year in Union County and parts of Somerset County.

“I can’t begin to tell you how useful and important this donation is to the people we serve throughout the central New Jersey community,” Mr. Beck said.

“The number of people seeking our help in every single area — mental healthcare, home healthcare, nursing care, food security — is constantly increasing. People really rely on us.”

Mr. Gottlieb calls Mr. Beck “my mother’s greatest contribution to JFS.”

Indeed, Ms. Gottlieb took a gamble in 1985 by hiring Mr. Beck, then a young social worker-administrator at a psychiatric hospital in Wisconsin, as assistant director. He became executive director two years later. (“My mom had very good instincts,” Mr. Gottlieb said.)

“When Mickey’s mom was president, it was a \$300,000 agency and one of the smallest agencies for Jewish family services in New Jersey,” Mr. Beck said. “Now we’re one of the largest, with an \$8.5 million annual budget and 129 staff members.

“Within Lilly Gottlieb’s and the Harvitt family’s philosophy, we evolved from an agency that served primarily the Jewish community to serving the entire community. We’re very proud of the diversity of the agency’s staff and the clientele we serve.

“At the same time, we’ve remained tied to the Jewish community. We deliver 140 Kosher Meals on Wheels daily. We provide 140,000 hours of homecare service; award-winning Holocaust programs to our survivors; and Shabbat packages to Orthodox residents of Elizabeth, Hillside, and Springfield through the Tomchei Shabbos program.”

Mr. Harvitt pointed out that diversifying the agency has benefited its Jewish clients as well, due to state and federal grants for which JFS Central NJ would not have qualified if it were a sectarian agency serving only the Jewish community.

Despite governmental funding and support from the Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest, he emphasized, “Mickey and I always say the needs this year are greater than last year — and that’s the truth. I really feel that JFS is where your money hits the streets. You can see it, for example, when you stand at the food pantry.”