

Sherry Chait



Anyone who meets Sherry Chait comes away with something. To the man who did her floors she gave Beanie Babies and books for his four children. And the young man she met in China 40 years ago got a college education from the woman he still calls his American mom.

They met as he did Tai Chi by her hotel near the Yangtze River at a time when Chinese officials frowned on citizens mixing with foreigners. But Sherry felt connected to the boy and nothing would stop her from reaching out to him. It should be little surprise, then, that when Sherry Chait celebrates a milestone birthday, she's the one giving gifts. For instance, on her 75th birthday, she contributed toward the cost of a new ambulance for Israel.

Sherry can't help but lend a hand year-round. After reading in the newspaper about how Lutheran Services in America brought from Rwanda to Jacksonville a man who lost a leg when he stepped on a mine, Sherry adopted the family for a year, helping them assimilate to life in Jacksonville. And when she read about someone looking to create a library for an orphanage in Kenya, she bought books at garage sales and sent them over. She once again used the goodwill of books after visiting a synagogue in Split. Realizing they did not have any prayer books, she sent them 40 books for their community upon her arrival home.

Sherry also helps people close to home. For instance, she minded her friend's store while the friend went to tend to her sick husband. Sherry hasn't always had means.

She grew up in Brooklyn's first low-income housing project with some books, one teddy bear and a pair of skates. Her father, a native of Europe, was a waiter and her mother, who came to the United States from Minsk at age 12 in 1912, was a seamstress. Still, her childhood was rich in simple pleasures such as playing handball on the stoop.

Jewish music filled her home -- her mother, Becky, tuned the radio only to WEVD, the Jewish radio station -- and Sherry still loves listening to "My Shaina Maidelah," although she would come to love Eydie Gorme and Steve Lawrence, too. Selflessness runs in Sherry's family. She remembers her sister running into the street to stop a car to take Sherry to the hospital after she fell on a rock at age 8. Surrounded by such kindness, Sherry came to understand that relationships matter most.

Sherry married Jerry, a mechanical engineer, at age 18 and they had three daughters -- Donna, Debra and Jill -- in quick succession. After 15 years of focusing on her family, Sherry did something for herself.

At age 39, Sherry earned her college degree from Queens College, near where the young family had moved. She studied drama, English and theater. The three years it took her to complete her courses were some of the most challenging of her life. Raising children, being a wife and studying proved difficult, but Sherry learned that she could achieve whatever she set her mind to.

From Queens, the family moved to Elmont, Long Island, where she became active at the Elmont Jewish Center and made lifelong friends. Later, the Chaits moved to Boonton Township, N.J., where Sherry reveled in luxuries such as having her own parking space, dishwasher and air conditioner.

In 1996, she and Jerry moved to Ponte Vedra, Fla., to be near their daughter, Donna, whom Sherry jokes isn't around much because of her work, which includes being the founder of Generation W, which works to educate, inspire and connect women and girls. Jill has worked in the travel and retail markets, while Debra is an accomplished bookkeeper and talented artist.

Sherry and Jerry have five grandchildren. Sherry worked in real estate and fine art, but her true success is evident in the piles of thank-you notes that she's received for her philanthropy. One synagogue recognized her as "Queen Esther," a Jewish heroine known for helping people.

In November 2015, the Jacksonville Jewish News named her Mensch of the Month. And Sherry is still at it, working to raise money to build a school at Beth El – The Beaches Synagogue, which she is actively involved in. When she's not saving the world, she enjoys playing canasta, mah jong and bridge, and watching "Shark Tank" and movies, she loves movies of all kinds.