

September 19, 2005

## A career spent capitalizing on strengths

*Zelda Schwartz retiring as director of family therapy at Jewish Family Service*

By Elizabeth Cooney TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF  
ecooney@telegram.com

**WORCESTER**— Zelda Jacobson Schwartz has a story to tell.

Make that many stories.

Retiring as director of family therapy at Jewish Family Service, she has been reflecting on this transition after guiding countless couples, children and families through their life changes. “That’s what therapists do, right?” she asks with her disarming mix of candor, humor and insight.

At 66, her life story embraces the changing role of women, the importance of mentors who guided and sometimes pushed her to contribute her gifts, and the power of therapy to help people face challenges in their lives. She is allowing a fund-raising brunch to be held in her honor this Sunday only as a way to reveal and support the “secret on Salisbury,” which is what she calls the agency where she grew up.

As a little girl, she came along to JFS board meetings with her father, Irving W. Jacobson, vice president and director of Idle Wild Foods, who was board treasurer at the time of his death in 1975. He taught her that life should be better for her having passed through it, and repaying the community by helping others was a way to do it.

That lesson had a caveat. As proud as her parents were of her success in school, they worried about her future.

“My father would alternate between telling me I had to make a contribution to life and cautioning me not to be too smart because there wouldn’t be a man who would have me,” she said. “My mother would say things like, ‘It’s just really important, dear, to know how to make a good sponge cake.’ She was a marvelous homemaker and every meal was a work of art.”



Zelda J. Schwartz stands in the driveway to the Jewish Family Service office off Salisbury Street. (T&G Photo/BETTY JENEWIN)

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### Tribute to Zelda Schwartz

**When:** 10:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Sunday  
**Where:** Temple Sinai, 661 Salisbury St., Worcester  
**How much:** Cost is \$36; children under age 12 free.  
Proceeds benefit the Jewish Family Service of Worcester Inc.  
**For more:** Call (508) 755-3101

Young Zelda Jacobson graduated from the then all-girls Bancroft School and enrolled at Skidmore College, where all her roommates left after sophomore year, having gotten pinned or engaged.

When she graduated and told her father she wanted to continue her education in graduate school, he was appalled, fearing she would be sacrificing marriage and family. "I don't want to arrive at 40 not knowing who I am," she told him. "I want to be a mom and I want to be a wife. I want to know how to make a sponge cake, but I think there's something more."

The choices for "something more" were limited to nurse, teacher or social worker. Her days at JFS tipped the balance toward social work, so she applied and was accepted to Simmons College's school of social work.

Then love intervened. She got reacquainted with her high school sweetheart, Paul Schwartz, who had moved away when she was 15 and was then attending medical school. He proposed, and in a turn of events unthinkable now, he was able to convince the Simmons dean of social work to phone up his counterpart at Washington University in St. Louis to find a place for his fiancée while he completed his medical training there.

"If I let her out of my sight, I will lose her again," he pleaded.

The dean made the call and she was accepted, moving into a dorm while Dr. Schwartz, now a cardiologist in Worcester, lived with his parents until the couple married.

In the next phase of her life, Mrs. Schwartz stayed home and raised their three daughters until landing a job as a social worker at the Southern Worcester County Educational Collaborative.

After her father died in 1975, she and her sisters, Judith Clark and Lois Edinberg, established an annual educational program for mental health professionals in Mr. Jacobson's memory that would be presented by the Jewish Family Service.

Marvin Najberg, then the agency's executive director, encouraged Mrs. Schwartz to develop a private practice at JFS in addition to her other job — first one night a week, then two, and then adding an afternoon.

Then he really began pushing her in a way she said transformed her life.

He urged her to enroll at the Ackerman Institute for Family Therapy in New York. She had been attending continuing education conferences, but studying in New York was out of the question, she said, with three children still at home.

Still he pushed her, praising her talent as a therapist, knowing she was fascinated by the wave of women moving the field away from pathologizing people's problems toward an approach known as normative transitions taught at the Ackerman Institute. The notion suggests that changes, such as divorce or death or other losses, can stir up difficulties in an individual or a family that should be met by capitalizing on the people's strengths.

It was 1987 when she found an advanced training session at the Ackerman Institute that met only on Mondays. She was accepted, and so began her one-year, once-a-week commute to New

York and a new way to look at therapy.

“That changed my life. I really felt like a hayseed in a pinafore with pigtails,” she said. “When I came home, I felt like an accomplished therapist. I had trained with the best and been mentored by the person who pushed me out the door. Marvin Najberg was the kind of boss who gave me wings and said, ‘Fly.’ ”

Training completed, she taught what she learned to therapists in a program at the Worcester Youth Guidance Center that provided field placement for doctoral students in psychology and interns in social work. She taught others how to work with many family members in a room, and also how to work with other therapists as a team.

The approach was encouraged by Mr. Najberg at JFS. He saw the agency as not only a nonprofit helping people in need, but also as a highly skilled professional group doing difficult work.

Stephen Slaten, a clinical psychologist who has been executive director at JFS since 1998, said Mrs. Schwartz didn’t shy away from the difficulty of bringing together people in conflict. Ten years ago, she tackled a pilot project for parents to help children cope with divorce. The program is now court-mandated in many counties of Massachusetts.

“She’s really been a phenomenal clinician,” he said. “She has the courage to work with difficult families, in some cases bringing parents in together who don’t necessarily even want to be in the same room with each other when she feels they need to do it to help their kids.”

Mrs. Schwartz will continue to see old clients at JFS two days a week, although she is relinquishing her role as director of family therapy. The counseling program is going to be named the Zelda Jacobson Schwartz Counseling Center.

“We’re really trying to honor her spirit because she did set a tone of insisting on quality treatment and really involving the relevant people in families and the relevant people in the community,” Dr. Slaten said.

Rabbi Seth L. Bernstein has known Mrs. Schwartz and her family as members of the Temple Sinai congregation. He said the community is indebted to her for her own work and for the work she has done with other therapists.

“She has great skills, and she has improved not only the lives of individuals and couples but of entire families, as have her colleagues at Jewish Family Service. But she herself adds an additional component in terms of conflict resolution, mediation and some very difficult conflictual situations,” he said. “She has been a part of helping people get to better resolutions in their lives.”

State Sen. Harriette Chandler, D-Worcester, is a longtime friend of Mrs. Schwartz and also grew up in a time when women rarely pursued independent professions. Not only did Mrs. Schwartz succeed against those odds, but she also grew as a therapist with the changing roles in families, responding to different needs that came with those changes.

“She does think out of the box and she isn’t afraid to try things,” she said. “She’s innovative.”

Forty-four years after choosing to be a social worker and psychotherapist, Mrs. Schwartz traces the qualities that led her there. First come her sensitivity and empathy, followed by a love of language and its power to help people tell their own stories. People may feel depleted, stuck in a transition of life such as divorce or death, unable to move forward. A therapist can reframe that story in a way that offers a person in pain a new way to see themselves and their situation.

Facing her own happy transition to a partial retirement, she does have one project for her newfound time. A longtime runner, she now can train for longer events, such as a half-marathon in Maine to benefit the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society.

On the winding driveway to the JFS home, she appears more than equal to the 13-mile challenge, a vibrant woman who walks briskly and punctuates her stories with throaty chuckles. But once she sits in her office inside, waving a visitor to sit down on the couch, her voice gets softer and lower as she comes to an important point.

“Nobody’s story is the same as anybody else’s. A person can tell me a story and it’s up to me to do a positive reframe on what they have told me,” she said. “When people come to see me, they feel powerless and weak. They feel awful, and then something happens in the room that bonds you together with new understanding.”

She is grateful to love the work she chose.

“The greatest gift I was given was I always had the autonomy to develop whatever interest I had,” she said.

And she shares one of her secrets: orange juice.

“That’s how you make a terrific sponge cake,” she said.

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