

# BALTIMORE Jewish Times

## Pikesville's 'Jewel'

North Oaks celebrates milestone with its  
25th anniversary

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BY MARC SHAPIRO

Everyone at North Oaks — from the staff to the leadership to the residents — will say that the Pikesville retirement community is like a family. Put five of the residents together, and it's immediately evident. "I think the thing is, we're all getting older together so we all have the same complaints," Freida Mazer said.

"You hear that typical 'oy vey' when they sit down and 'oy vey' when they get up," added Paul Wartzman.

"'Oy vey' is more sitting up than 'oy vey' sitting down," quipped Marvin Solomon right on cue.

For 25 years, North Oaks has been not only a retirement community, but the backdrop for making new friendships, rekindling old friendships and aging with dignity (albeit with some humor) and engagement.

"We see ourselves as being Pikesville's retirement community," executive director Mark Pressman said. "People come here to be with their friends, and there are frequent reunions of friends from school, and I've come to learn that when we talk about reunions from school we're talking about elementary school. I refer to these as 'Pikesville moments,' and they happen all the time."

North Oaks held a 25th anniversary celebration on Tuesday, Nov. 11, where residents, community members, staff and elected officials enjoyed a catered cocktail reception and several presentations. North Oaks was honored by Delegates Dana Stein and Shelly Hettleman, Baltimore County Executive Kevin Kamenetz, Councilwoman Vicki Almond and Congressman Dutch Ruppersberger.



“This is one of Baltimore County’s jewels,” Almond told the crowd. “We’re fortunate to have this beautiful residence on this hilltop for people who want to stay in their community but are ready for a place that offers support services and assistance.”

She echoed earlier comments from Kamenetz, who said his wife’s grandmother, Bernice Hoffberger, was among North Oaks’ first residents.

“We understood the benefit of this facility,” he said. “It gives all the residents the opportunity to stay engaged with family, and that’s the most important thing that keeps us going.”



## The Evolution to North Oaks

The property on which North Oaks sits was once Livesy Farm. It became a country retreat in 1879, thanks to an endowment by businessman and shipping magnate Thomas Wilson, who had two children who died at young ages of “summer complaint” from city living. While the retreat was established for kids who became sick because of unhealthy city air, it was closed in 1914 when the source of the children’s sickness was identified as bad milk, not “bad air,” according to research conducted by North Oaks resident Lottie Greene, which was published in a pamphlet given out at the 25th anniversary celebration.

In 1924, the state of Maryland bought the property and opened a tuberculosis treatment center that then-Gov. Albert Ritchie called “the nerve center” of Maryland’s fight against the disease, which was the leading cause of death at the time. In the summer of 1950, work began on a \$3 million “state-of-the-art” hospital. In the mid-1960s, with a cure for tuberculosis available, the facility switched gears to treat other respiratory diseases and later became a treatment center for those suffering from alcohol and drug addiction. That center closed in 1981.

The property sat vacant for nearly a decade, until Life Care Services, Mullan Contracting and Pikesville surgeon Dr. Elmer Hoffman partnered to remodel the facility, which would reopen as North Oaks Retirement Community in December 1990.

“Twenty-five years ago, some visionaries determined that ... this would make a nice place for some lucky people to spend their senior years. Today, we, the residents of North Oaks, are those lucky people,” said Marty Waxman, president of the North Oaks Residents Association. “[We’re] participating in the celebration today of an idea that blossomed into a full-service retirement community.”

Although it’s a lively, booming place now, North Oaks’ success and current look can be traced back to rougher times, 2008 to 2010, during the economic recession and its aftermath.

“That recession hit North Oaks very hard with a lagging occupancy and an aging building,” Pressman told the crowd during last week’s celebration. People were dying but not being replaced by new residents. Selling the facility was possible, but a well-publicized sale to a local physician fell through.

That’s when Joe Brucella, who recently retired from Life Care Services, came up with a plan to move forward via capital improvements. In 2012, the “new” North Oaks emerged with a redone lobby area with a café that



now serves as a community meeting space and other upgrades such as brightening up the hallways and a redone roof.

“The revitalized North Oaks emerged ... to take our hospitality culture to a new level and to regain the confidence of our residents and families,” Pressman said.

And it paid off, as North Oaks has grown by about five residents per year since 2012. Pressman said the retirement community is on track for that addition this year as well.

North Oaks currently has 175 residents, 20 percent of whom are couples, and 176 apartments. The retirement community offers independent living, assisted living, comprehensive care and skilled rehabilitation.

## Staying Engaged

A look at North Oaks’ November calendar shows the variety of activities in which residents can participate — there are classes on contemporary Jewish issues, music and immigration; bingo; aerobics; chair yoga; Wii bowling; art workshops; outings to theaters, grocery stores, banks and restaurants; choir practice; knitting; and screenings of football games and movies.

And Jewish life at North Oaks is thriving. Resident Paul Wartzman leads Shabbat services on Saturday mornings, a couple comes in once or twice a month to lead as well, and there are High Holiday services. There was a Sukkah for Sukkot this year as well.



“We get latkes on Shabbos,” Wartzman said. “We get kugel, gefilte fish, herring, chopped liver occasionally.”

He even started a Yiddish class that generated considerable interest from residents.

“I don’t know how much better it could be, really,” he said about Jewish life at North Oaks.

Another big hit at North Oaks is the writing class, which Goucher College professor Barbara Roswell has taught for years.

“It’s never explicitly therapeutic, but it can be healing,” she said, “and it can be wonderfully entertaining.”

Pressman recalls a resident who was often “angry and bristling” after his wife passed away but became much more mellow and at ease by participating in the writing class.

As another commemoration of North Oaks’ 25th anniversary, Roswell decided to publish a volume of works from her writing class. The result is “View from the Hilltop,” more than 60 essays, poems and short stories. Roswell’s mother, North Oaks resident Edith Sherr, is among the authors.

In her introduction, Roswell writes how, through the stories “you meander down the streets of Baltimore City in the 1920s to the Ideal Music Shop, absorb the shock of Pearl Harbor, camp on Korean battlefields, meet Jackie

Mason, celebrate marriages and careers, ride horseback in Afghanistan. You debate Donald Trump and share hard-won advice for great-grandchildren whose lives are just beginning.”

“If you think about this group as the Greatest Generation, to think about what the cauldron was that shaped that generation,” Roswell said, “many of them write about [the Great] Depression, war, overcoming anti-Semitism, leaving jobs because the positions were for organizations that were in bed with McCarthy and on principle saying ‘I will not do this.’”

“People have released many tensions and have freed themselves of emotional burdens through writing,” said Sherr, whose writing in the book touched on memories of being a high school teacher, starting college and wanting a little sister and instead getting a little brother.

While North Oaks is ripe with stimulating activities, residents and leadership say the atmosphere also owes a lot to its 155 employees.

“You come in here and a couple days later they’re calling you by name. They’ve all learned your meds. They make you feel good,” Solomon said.

If a resident is sick, employees call their children to keep them posted.

“You’re taken care of,” Mazer said. “Your children can have their lives, and they don’t have to worry about it, which is so important.”

Things as small as knowing that a resident likes iced tea with dinner go a long way.

“It’s harder to find someone with the right attitude about working with seniors and being of service to them,” Pressman said. “If you’re a server, housekeeper or maintenance tech, we can teach you how to do much of that. To care about the people you’re working with, that are surrounding you, that’s a whole other thing. We try to recruit people that seem to have that quality from the start.”

North Oaks residential health services coordinator Diane Witles, an employee since its beginning in 1991, said she and her staff get to know clients, their families and their idiosyncrasies very well because it’s a smaller community. And the atmosphere at North Oaks is informed by their work.

“Most of the folks you take care of are very appreciative. Older folks, in general, I think are treated as sub-citizens, stupid, childlike,” she said. “I like to treat my clients as if they are adults who need some assistance.”

For many, such as the North Oaks Residents Association president, the 25-year milestone was a sign that North Oaks has a rich past and bright future ahead.

“To mark this 25th anniversary, a tree was planted in the courtyard,” Waxman said. “The planting of a tree literally establishes roots on this hilltop and gives us assurance that North Oaks is here to stay. And on behalf of the residents association, I say ‘amen.’”

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