

Volunteer writes of her 22 years in palliative care

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As her five children were growing up and becoming less dependent on her and she approached her 40th birthday, Barbara Freiheit began thinking about what to do with her extra time and energy.

She and her husband considered having a sixth child, but instead Freiheit left her comfortable life and became a volunteer in a palliative care unit, almost on a whim.

That was the beginning of what would be a 22-year vocation. Freiheit spent up to three days a week with dying people, not only friendly visiting, but frequently pitching in to help nurses with even unpleasant tasks like emptying bedpans. She once washed a corpse and zipped it into a body bag.

Freiheit recounts her experiences with sensitivity and humour in her recently published book *Life Before Death: Stories of Love, Laughter and Loss in Palliative Care* [Liberty Books].

She packs numerous stories into 190 pages – of how the adults of all ages and backgrounds that she tried to comfort

faced their final days. (Names and certain biographical details are altered to protect their identities.)

It's also a primer on how a typical PCU functions and on the relationships among staff, volunteers, patients, families and often the clergy.

Freiheit does not specifically name the institution where she spent most of those 22 years, only referring to it as Jewish and kosher, but serving people of all origins. It is Mount Sinai Hospital in Côte St. Luc, she confirms.

As the title suggests, Freiheit discovered that people remain who they are to the very end of their consciousness, their personality traits and attitudes (good and bad) intact.

Their interest in life is usually little diminished, and sometimes even intensified. Most do not obsess about dying, preferring to talk about the things that anybody might with a casual acquaintance.

Their emotional range also remains broad: they cry but they also laugh. In fact, it is Freiheit's ability to see the funny side of just about everything that she feels is the most important quality she brought to the job.

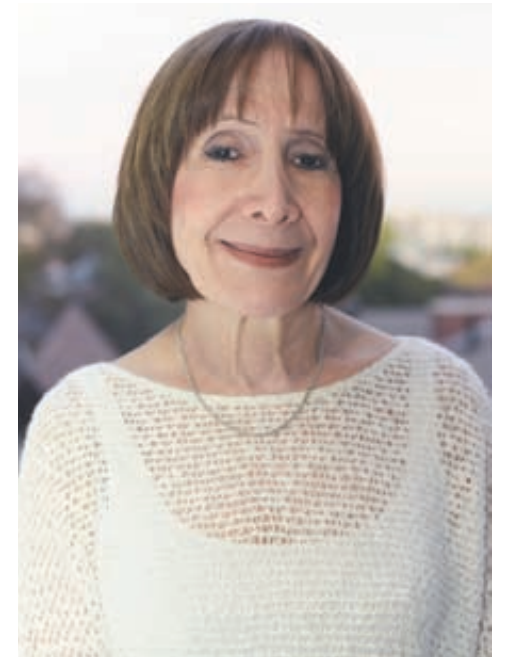
In all those years, she can remember only one instance where her jokiness fell flat.

"Is there life before death?" she asks in the preface. "Yes, there is. Even for those who know they are dying, life still goes on. Despite being aware of their impending death, people most often choose to remain connected to the living, engaged with the world around them."

Above all, she emphasizes that working in palliative care is not depressing, although it is often sad. Ultimately, she describes her experience as emotionally and spiritually enriching, although she is not religious and is not convinced of the flip side that there is life after death.

She has seen how faith has given many people strength and, among Jews, the more Orthodox appear to be less apprehensive than the mainstream. (She also includes some interesting observations about Holocaust survivors and the way they deal with institutional care and dying, in regard to both themselves and their relatives.)

Freiheit was as fearful and ignorant of death as the next person when she showed up at the former Montreal Con-



Barbara Freiheit

valescent Hospital all those years ago, answering a newspaper ad she happened to notice. She was also a bit of a hypochondriac and a germophobe.

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THE JERUSALEM FOUNDATION OF CANADA
LA FONDATION JÉRUSALEM DU CANADA

DIRECTOR, TORONTO OFFICE

JOB DESCRIPTION

The Director of the Toronto office is a dynamic professional, a strong communicator and fundraiser whose primary responsibility is to strengthen relationships with existing donors and to identify and develop relationships with prospective donors, secure philanthropic commitments as well as planned gifts in support of the Jerusalem Foundation's identified priorities.

PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITIES

- In concert with the National Executive Director, set annual goals and a work plan for Toronto that are recommended to the Board of Directors for approval
- Develop and implement prospecting, cultivation, solicitation and stewardship strategies for current and potential Major Donors in a thoughtful and timely manner
- Develop and manage strategies to broaden and engage Jerusalem Foundation's overall donor base of Toronto
- Identify and develop strategies, where appropriate, for introduction of current and prospective Major Donors to lay leaders, or national or international staff for canvassing opportunities

ADDITIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

- Work with identified New Leadership prospects to help strengthen their relationship to JFC and to encourage broader participation by those aged 27-40 years old
- Work closely with contract staff hired from time to time to manage Toronto events, ensuring attendance by Major Donors at functions wherever possible

QUALIFICATIONS

- Understanding of the Canadian philanthropic community and key leaders in Toronto
- A heartfelt and infectious passion for Jerusalem/Israel
- Excellent ability to create and implement both short-term and long-term development strategies
- Confident in discussing Major Gifts
- Excellent interpersonal and networking skills
- Excellent communication skills, both oral and written
- Excellent ability to work with a high degree of autonomy
- Have the courage to be creative in strategic endeavours and approaches that will inspire donors
- Experience in fundraising, sales and/or marketing

We invite you to explore The Jerusalem Foundation of Canada and the Jerusalem Foundation to learn more about our mission and impact. Please visit our website at www.jerusalemfoundation.org. To submit your name for consideration, interested candidates are asked to send a resume and letter to Monica E. Berger, National Executive Director at mberger@jerusalemfoundation.ca.



Netivot HaTorah Day School Seeks Director of Gan Netivot

Title: Director, Gan Netivot

Reports to: Head of School

Location: Netivot HaTorah Day School, North Campus, 18 Atkinson Avenue, Thornhill

Our Preschool program comprises children ages 2-5, and operates within Netivot HaTorah Day School, Toronto's only Orthodox Zionist Day School.

Job Summary:

The Director's authority extends to the management of the entire Gan and to administering resources to the Gan staff, facility and families. The Director is a member of the Senior Educational Team and reports directly to the Head of School.

Qualifications:

- Completion of Early Childhood Education (ECE)
- Minimum 5 years ECE teaching experience
- Preferably a Master's Degree in ECE education
- Strong Administrative background
- Good knowledge of spoken Hebrew
- Must model the vision of Netivot's core values, which emphasizes Torah, Israel and Derech Eretz

Principle Duties and Responsibilities:

- Building programs to include:
- Recruitment of New Families
- Family Engagement and Child Growth
- Mentoring and Evaluation of Gan Staff
- Managing all Aspects of Curriculum to Meet the Needs of all Children

Email resume to Dr. Reuven Stern, Head of School:
rstern@netivot.com

Author learned life lessons from terminally ill patients

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Although she held a psychology degree and teaching diploma, Freiheit was otherwise little qualified to become a palliative care volunteer. But she was, obviously, maternal and had a desire to nurture; the terminal and, most frequently, elderly just didn't seem like an obvious choice.

Death had affected her early in life – her father died of a stroke at 52 when she was not quite 14. It took her years to come to terms with that blow, she relates in the book.

Yet, the hospital, which had a 15-bed PCU in the basement took her on, maybe because people were not clamouring to do this sort of task. Freiheit was petrified the first day she entered the ward, and was surprised that it was the patients who put her at ease, rather than the other way around.

One touching story that illustrates the will to live until an important milestone is reached is that of the 51-year-old woman dying of cancer, who clung to life long enough for the birth of her first grandchild. Her last wish was to witness his bris, and arrangements were made to

have the ceremony at the hospital. She died soon after, content, according to Freiheit.

Life Before Death comes at an important time in the public discussion over end-of-life care, as Quebec moves to implement Bill 52, which gives people the right to medical aid in dying, and the Supreme Court prepares to address the issues of physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia for first time in more than two decades.

Freiheit takes no position in the book, but in an interview, she said the palliative care she has seen is of high quality, but there is a lack of it. Such care allows most patients to die without undue physical or psychological distress, she said, but she has seen heart-rending cases where pain cannot be controlled or the person simply does not want to endure any longer.

Despite her long and intimate experience, Freiheit has not made up her mind on the issue of whether doctors should be legally allowed to intervene any further than they can now in bringing suffering to an end.

Although they were not in pallia-

tive care, Freiheit also writes about the deaths of her mother and of a close friend who was only in her 50s. Her closeness to death did not make their illnesses and her eventual loss of them any easier for Freiheit.

Freiheit has been away from volunteering for a few years now, after the birth of grandchildren, mostly out of town, a house fire and, of course, to write, among other distractions, but hopes to get back to it.

That fire, which destroyed her Westmount home, finally prompted her to publish a book. A journal she had been keeping over the years was one of the few items that survived the blaze.

"That told me I was meant to write this book," said Freiheit, who was assisted by professional editor Gina Roitman.

Whether she goes back to a PCU or not, Freiheit expects to continue to be asked what insight or wisdom she has gained – is she less afraid of mortality?

Death is still ultimately a mystery to her, but she has learned what's important in life from the dying.

"The PCU is a place of honesty, truth and emotional connectedness. In the

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In the Palliative Care Unit, the money and possessions one has managed to accumulate are unimportant.

PCU, the money and possessions one has managed to accumulate are unimportant. Achievements and social status are of no significance either," she writes.

It may sound trite but truly, "loving and giving is what makes life worth living," Freiheit concludes. ■



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