

Something special

By Ashley Zeldin | PUBLISHED Sep 16, 2011 | Lifestyle

Stephen Michaels' fondest memories of his Aunt Lisa are of watching movies with her.

"I remember being next to her, just being with her," he said. "It was fun."

One of her favorites was "Forrest Gump." She could relate.

At age 12, Stephen is the same age that his aunt was when she entered residential care in 1979. Lisa Kaplan, who was born with three holes in her heart and Down syndrome, required round-the-clock care.

"Stephen was very young, but he understood her suffering," said Marlene Michaels, Stephen's mom and Lisa's sister. "He would just hold her hand and watch movies. He would look into her eyes and sense what her needs were. He made my sister very happy."

Lisa died from heart complications in 2002 at age 35, but Stephen is keeping her memory alive through his bar mitzvah project: he is working to make the residents of Valley Village — a Winnetka-based facility for the developmentally disabled where Lisa spent some of her happiest years — happy as well.

"She gave me the motivation for all the stuff I've done for people with special needs," Stephen said.

After a planned Purim carnival visit in mid-March was rained out, Stephen arranged for almost 100 Valley Village residents to attend a Sheldon Low concert at his synagogue, Shomrei Torah, a week later.

“Our clients had an amazing time,” said Anush Sumian, Valley Village’s development coordinator. “It was really special. They love to socialize and get out and be with society.”

Seeing the Valley Village residents singing along and enjoying themselves was also rewarding for Stephen, a seventh-grader at Colina Middle School in Thousand Oaks.

“It makes me happy that these people, who may not be able to experience something like this often, are having fun,” he said.

Sumian said opportunities like the concert are rare for Valley Village, since the nonprofit can’t afford the cost.

But Stephen raised \$2,000 to give the residents of Valley Village the chance, and he plans to keep giving back to the organization that made his aunt’s life so much easier.

Lisa lived at Valley Village from 1990 to 1995 with her caretaker, Sujata Rawate.

“She was in so many different homes, but finally Mom found Valley Village, and it changed my family’s world, especially my sister’s,” Marlene Michaels said. “They were able to give her not only a safe place to live but also a place where she had activities, stimulation and warm, caring people to take care of her.”

Several months ago, Stephen and his family visited the home where Lisa lived, and spent time with Rawate and the residents, some of whom were around when Lisa lived there.

“It was fun interacting with them and seeing how they live, getting a taste of what it’s like for them every day,” he said.

Stephen realizes the importance of enriching the lives of special-needs individuals of all ages, and he has enjoyed the opportunity to participate in programs with the Tikvah campers at Camp Ramah for two summers running.

“I’ve been a Ramah camper for a while, so it felt cool giving back to Ramah,” he said. The highlights, he said, were filming skits and learning Israeli dancing and Krav Maga with the Tikvah campers.

“It was great to see him want to take that interest,” said his father, Randy Michaels, who serves as Ramah’s director of finance and administration, and helps ensure that programs like Tikvah have a place in the Camp Ramah community. “As a Ramah-nik myself at Ramah Wisconsin, I was buddied up with the Tikvah kids when I was a camper his age, so that, to me, is exciting.”

Although the Tikvah program has been in existence for several years, it wasn’t around when Lisa was young.

“When my sister was younger, there weren’t any organizations, including the synagogue, there to help her. It was mostly Catholic charities,” Marlene Michaels explained. “Now everything has changed. Especially within the Conservative movement, they are just completely there for helping kids with special needs.”

The Michaelses share their passion for people with special needs with Shomrei Torah Assistant Rabbi Erez Sherman, who is overseeing Stephen’s bar mitzvah training. Rabbi Sherman’s older brother, Eyal, is a paraplegic.

“We connected immediately,” Rabbi Sherman recalled of his initial meeting with the Michaels family in preparation for Stephen’s bar mitzvah this November. “He’s trying to open doors to the special-needs community. He doesn’t do this because he wants to get his name in the paper, he does this because it’s the right thing to do. It’s a legacy to his aunt.”

Rabbi Sherman hopes the association continues.

“I hope to hold annual events to connect the residents to us and us to them,” he said.

Stephen serves as a positive example to his 9-year-old brother, Alex, too.

“It makes me happy that he’s doing stuff to help kids, and he’s doing a great job,” Alex said.

Stephen plans to continue his efforts after his bar mitzvah in November. He still wants to see his original idea through, bringing the Valley Village residents to next year’s Purim carnival.

“If we can get that idea going, I feel like it would be fun for them. I want to keep on doing this and do more,” he said.