

THE JEWISH CHRONICLE

Caregiver Champions spread their support

by Toby Tabachnick
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Penny Mateer knows a thing or two about caring for others.

For three years, she was the primary source of support for her father, who was suffering from cancer, and who passed away in 2006. She and her husband are now caring for her mother-in-law, who is afflicted with Alzheimer's disease.

Mateer has faced tough challenges as a caregiver, including finding ways to make those for whom she has cared maintain a sense of self and well-being, learning to negotiate the healthcare system, and dealing with her own personal stress.

She is one of six volunteer Caregiver Champions who are trained to share what they have learned with other caregivers through a new community initiative sponsored by the Jewish Healthcare Foundation.

The first Squirrel Hill-based program will launch Tuesday, June 22.

"I think it's an extremely noble and great thing to do, when we take care of our family members," Mateer said. "This is my way of giving back."

Caregiver Champions provides neighborhood salons where groups of caregivers gather for six free two-hour discussions—called Learning Circles—designed to provide informal learning in a casual setting. Each Learning Circle features an expert to provide useful tips and advice, ranging in topics from identifying caregiver burnout to advance planning. The Learning Circles are hosted by a Caregiver Champion, such as Mateer.

"It's not a support group, and it's not a formal lecture," said Beth Polonchak, project coordinator. "It's kind of a blend of the two. It's a happy by-product."

"The Jewish Healthcare Foundation has been involved in care-giving almost since its inception," said Nancy Zionts, chief program officer of the JHF. "It is the cornerstone of our agenda."

The idea for Caregiver Champions was conceived around a "simple idea," said Zionts. "So many seniors have caregivers, and many are overwhelmed every single day. But sometimes we run across someone

with the same duties, but who can accomplish all the tasks before them without getting flustered on a day-to-day basis. They have resilience.”

Those experienced caregivers can then use what they have learned to empower others, according to Zionts.

The program is funded, in part, by a \$300,000 grant by the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation.

Through the grant, the JHF is able to fund respite care so that caregivers can leave their loved ones in good hands while they attend the sessions. Caregivers submitting invoices to the JHF will be reimbursed those expenses, Polonchak said.

The first Learning Circle was launched in Penn Hills in March, and others have been organized in Oakmont, Upper St. Clair and Monroeville.

The initiative currently has six Caregiver Champions leading various groups, and is actively looking to add to its ranks.

“We are eager to identify Caregiver Champions in the Jewish community,” Zionts said, adding that she would like to see the program grow to include Learning Circles at area synagogues and other locations.

All Caregiver Champions, as well as the expert speakers, are volunteers.

“What a gift that is to our community,” Zionts said.

The first session of the Squirrel Hill Learning Circle will be held Tuesday, June 22, at 1:00 p.m. at the Squirrel Hill Jewish Community Center. Pre-registration is required by calling 412-594-2569.

Read more: [The Jewish Chronicle - Caregiver Champions spread their support](#)