Blue Skies Ahead

The Blue Card is there to make sure survivors flourish, and not merely survive.

Written by Masha Pearl

Growing up in the affluent area of Scarsdale, New York, I lived what most would call a privileged life. Both of my parents were physicians, and they worked hard to ensure that I never wanted for anything. After attending SUNY Binghamton, I enjoyed a successful career at an international law firm. While I enjoyed this experience very much, I always felt that something was missing. I reached back to my past to find meaning for the future.

My grandparents, Holocaust survivors on both sides, were a very important part of my upbringing. Throughout high school, many of my friends at the time also had grandparents who were fortunate enough to have survived the Holocaust; however, I was unaware that not all were as blessed as my grandparents. While visiting my friend Nina’s Bubbe and Zayde one day, I was taken aback to see the conditions in which they lived. In stark contrast to the welcoming home of my grandparents, their apartment was dark and bleak, empty of furnishings, and uncomfortably cold from inadequate heating. I left their home with an aching heart.

Unable to shake the image, I got my hands on any and all information I could find regarding Holocaust survivors. I was astonished and disheartened to learn that one-third of Holocaust survivors actually live below the poverty line. This struck me as so egregiously unfair, to think that these courageous people who had endured so much still had to live with such suffering in their lives.

I was further shocked to learn that 73 percent of Holocaust survivors live alone; 80 percent cannot leave home without assistance; and 69 percent live on less than $12,000 annually. Holocaust survivors also experience a documented and substantially higher incidence of life-threatening diseases, for example, 14 percent higher rates of cancer for women and 21 percent higher rates for men as compared with the general population of the same age. In addition, many have no family and live extremely isolated lives.

It was upon learning about The Blue Card, an organization whose sole mission since 1934 is to provide financial assistance to needy Holocaust survivors, that I quickly realized that I had found the cause I was looking for, ensuring that these survivors will never again lose their dignity, especially in their final years.

The Blue Card was originally founded in Germany to help indigent Jews (aid recipients in those days received a blue card to note donations) and was reestablished in the United States in 1939 to aid Jewish refugees resettling in America. Since its inception, The Blue Card has distributed over $24 million, with 100 percent of individual donations going directly to survivors in urgent need areas.

In 2009, I was most fortunate to have the opportunity to join the then two-person staff of the organization as program coordinator. I was impressed by the scope of programs distributing cash stipends and together with my mentor, former executive director Elie Rubinstein,
was able to be on the ground floor of developing initiatives aimed at easing the plight of needy Holocaust survivors. I was able to grow with the organization, going on to become program director in 2011 and then taking on the role of executive director in January 2013.

Highlights of this year’s new programs include implementation of the Lissner Hospital Visitation Program. In this initiative, specially trained volunteers visit Holocaust survivors who are ill and injured and often would have no visitors at all without the Hospital Visitation Program. Another new initiative is the Siggi B. Wilzig Fighting Cancer Together Program, which helps survivors suffering from illness with medical co-pays, transportation to and from appointments, and treatments as well as emotional support.

What I’m most proud of is that The Blue Card employs innovative tools and approaches in order to raise funds and awareness for our survivors. For example, The Blue Card was the first Jewish organization to become an official charity at the prestigious New York City Marathon. Since then, our marathon teams have raised over $1 million through participation in related events, including the Miami, Atlanta, Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv marathons. We are also an official charity partner of the TD Bank Five Boro Bike Tour in New York City.

Additionally, The Blue Card hosts an annual gala, which is our most important fundraising event of the year. It is The Blue Card’s way of raising awareness on behalf of survivors while at the same time honoring outstanding philanthropists and human rights activists. Last year’s event was held at the American Museum of Natural History and honorees included well-known humanitarians Mia and Ronan Farrow. Other past Blue Card honorees include former New York City mayor Ed Koch, human rights activist Aryeh Neier, musician Regina Spektor, author and Holocaust survivor Ruth Gruber, and actors Danny Aiello and David Hyde Pierce.

I owe so much to The Blue Card’s board and staff. I even credit the organization with bringing me together with my husband, Josh. We were first introduced in July 2011 at a mutual friend’s Shabbat dinner. Josh expressed an interest in volunteering for The Blue Card, which had special meaning to him, since his grandparents were survivors of Auschwitz and Mauthausen and many of the traditions he follows are in honor of them. Today, we work together on several projects.

One of my main goals going forward is to encourage meaningful involvement of future generations with The Blue Card and other Holocaust organizations. It is so important that the Jewish community, as well as the world at large, recognize that the time to help is now, before all of the survivors are gone.

Please support the mission of The Blue Card and help us provide this crucial assistance to needy Holocaust survivors.