

Beachwood BUZZ

Reprint • January 2010

A Most Unique Congregation by Bev Fertel



“Does everybody have grape juice? I’ll bring the challah in just a minute.”

It is a little after 4 p.m. on Friday at Arden Courts Alzheimer’s Assisted Living, and Beachwood resident **Dave Cunix** (*pictured*) is presiding over Congregation Am Shalom, the People of Peace.

There are 12 Jewish residents at Arden Courts, an assisted living residence in Chagrin Falls that specializes in caring for people with Alzheimer’s disease and other forms of dementia. About a year ago, Dave Cunix, president of the Beachwood Chamber of Commerce, approached **Bev Fertel**, marketing director of Arden Courts and Chamber member, to ask if anyone was conducting Friday evening services for their Jewish residents. At the time there was no one consistently

meeting that need. Dave volunteered.

“My first time there, one of the residents looked at me and asked, ‘Are you a rabbi?’ I said, ‘No, I am the next best thing – an insurance agent!’” remembers Dave. Although he had volunteered in nursing homes since high school, designing a service that would meet the needs of people with dementia was a bit more challenging. Dave wanted to provide the type of service that would be best remembered from childhood and equal the attention span of the residents. He put together a booklet of prayers and songs in both Hebrew and English that the residents could follow and that would help stimulate past memories.

“Even those who have not been observant for many years have long-term memories that often return. Just like Catholic residents who go to Communion or Rosary, these are rituals they observed through their whole life,” said **Liz Heller**, program service coordinator of

Arden Courts. “Surprisingly, many residents will remember the services week to week; for those who don’t, once they are reminded, they look forward to them with anticipation.”

Family members often join the services, as spouses and adult children consider themselves part of the congregation. This provides families the opportunity to do something meaningful with their loved ones, taking them to a place and time prior to the illness. His friend, **Sally Mandel**, whom he refers to as his “lovely assistant,” sometimes accompanies Dave, often bringing smiles to residents’ faces.

“I enjoy the interaction with the residents,” said Dave. “Each has a unique personality. I delight in the days that we really connect, when they are totally ‘present’ at that moment.”

Religious rituals from previous experiences can be considered “procedural” or intact long-term memories. It is important for people with Alzheimer’s and other forms of dementia to observe these memories for their feelings of self worth and identity. Thanks to Dave Cunix and his Congregation Am Shalom, Arden Courts’ residents continue to have that connection.