

# THE JEWISH JOURNAL

## Senior Moments

## Chicken Soup and a Mother's Journey

By Ellie Kahn



*Mollie Pier cooks with one of her grandchildren.*

When I'm 79, I want to be Mollie Pier.

With a name like that, she could have been a torch singer or silent film actress, but she's not at all famous -- except to the people who appreciate and adore her.

What I love about Mollie is her vibrant, warm personality and her seemingly endless energy. At 4 feet 9 inches, Mollie is someone whom others truly look up to.

This Passover, Mollie's planning to cook for 80-100 people. She's not sure yet what she'll be making. Maybe her Pesach mandel bread or a special variation of her potato knishes.

Actually, she's not really cooking all these meals alone; she'll be surrounded by dozens of laughing and chattering teenagers, a few other seniors and adults who volunteer for Project Chicken Soup.

Formerly known as *Nechama*, which means comfort, the project offers just that: homemade meals, lovingly prepared and delivered by a group of devoted volunteers to approximately 100 people with HIV and AIDS. This coming Sunday, they'll be cooking for Pesach.

The project offers a rare opportunity for an intergenerational act of *tzedakah*. Many of the teens Mollie works with are meeting their school's community service requirement.

One of those is Danny Davis, from Harvard-Westlake School. He met Mollie recently at a synagogue meeting where she described Project Chicken Soup. "I had nothing better to do this morning but to help some people," said Danny. "It seemed like a moral decision; it seemed right to do this. Mollie said to be here tomorrow and I was here. She inspired me."

Mollie told me that Passover has a special significance for her. "It's a reminder of freedom," she says. "The freedom to make choices about how to use the gifts God has given us, and the freedom to be oneself."

The freedom to be oneself is not just a New Age concept to Mollie; it's very personal.

Ten years ago, just before *Nechama* came into being, Mollie lost her youngest son, Nathaniel, to AIDS. "He was one of the first physicians in New York City to treat people with the disease," recalls Mollie. "Everyone else in my family knew Nathaniel was gay -- my sisters knew, my other two sons knew. I was the only one that didn't. I was very active in the Jewish community at the time, and Nathaniel visualized me as this square Jewish mother who would reject him."

It's hard to imagine Mollie rejecting anyone, as she greets people at Project Chicken Soup with grandmotherly acceptance and love.

But acceptance is something she says she had to learn when it came to her son's homosexuality.

"I thought all gays were swishy, and I'd heard that they all had domineering mothers and weak fathers, which wasn't true in our family. I had to learn to be more accepting, so that Nathaniel could feel the freedom to tell me the truth."

How many of us are separated from loved ones by walls of misunderstanding or fear? As Mollie says, if we're to have real "freedom" in our lives, we have to feel that it's okay to be ourselves, and allow others that same freedom.

The word "exodus" means a departure. To me, it can also be seen as a transition from one life to another. Sometimes such a transition occurs in the relationship between parents and children.

I have a close friend whose parents are both Holocaust survivors. They decided not to tell their children the details of what they went through -- but my friend says that this omission caused her to feel a distance from her parents and a gap in her own identity. After a family tragedy, her parents began sharing themselves more openly with her, something that has dramatically changed my friend's life and allowed a new closeness with her parents.

It's an extraordinary experience, as Mollie Pier knows, to have such barriers broken down, to allow in the humanity, with all that involves -- anger and pain as well as love. Fortunately, Mollie says, she came to accept Nathaniel's choices for his life, so that they could have a closer relationship before he died at age 37.

Project Chicken Soup helped Mollie to grieve. "It gave me a spiritual feeling that my son's soul is still alive. I imagine he's looking down at me and saying, 'What you're doing is great.' I'm carrying on his work."

"This keeps me going," says Mollie, "and the volunteers keep the program going. But we depend on financial help from others to allow us to keep doing what we are doing."

Mollie's work touches many others -- those to whom she brings meals twice a month, and fellow volunteers who get to have an experience of cooking with a surrogate *bubbe*.

"I wouldn't be involved in this project if it weren't for people like Mollie," says the director of Project Chicken Soup, Rod Bran. "They share their Jewish warmth and the comfort that we all remember from going to Grandma's house, where we could smell her chicken soup. We try to bring that to our clients. Jewish food always makes you feel better, especially chicken soup."

Mollie's food does make people feel better, apparently. She's very proud of the fact that a young man who receives food from Project Chicken Soup called once to say, "We don't need a cure for AIDS; just send us Mollie's potato knishes!"

*For more information about Project Chicken Soup, call (323) 655-5330.*

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