

IRENE ZEHMAN VOLUNTEER AWARD
MAY 16, 2012

I am Charna Sherman, and one of the lucky granddaughters of Irene Ratner Zehman. And I am lucky to be here with so many other family members whose lives were also blessed by being related to her. They include my cousin, Nancy Wolf, and the two tables seated in the front. You all know them. Will all of the family please stand.

As some of you might recall from my teary introduction of last year's fabulous honorees -- the Mikvah Ladies -- this year wasn't supposed to be my turn to present this year's award. But as some of you also may have learned, last week Nancy sadly lost her brother -- and we lost our cousin -- Les Wolf, of blessed memory.

But amidst all the sadness and the grief, there was a moment during shiva when we all curled up in a corner of an apartment just above where Grandma Irene used to live and we shared some of our most touching memories of Les, of our family, and how his near death almost three decades ago brought us together in ways that have immeasurably enriched our lives. Indeed, the tradition in which we were raised by Grandma Irene, Aunt Roz, my Mom and the entire Ratner family never left open any other option: we all knew that we were expected to pitch in -- each in our own

way – to help him overcome the devastating disabilities with which he struggled the rest of his life, and help him find some joy and meaning amidst all of his overwhelming challenges. As Les -- once the 60s rebel -- might have waxed poetic in the verse of his generation:

Oh! Come on you people now
Smile on your brother
Everybody get together
Try to love one another right now

But what was always so striking to us about how we were raised was the unequivocal message that our responsibilities weren't just reserved for our family. Grandma Irene's legacy took to heart that our Bible starts first with a husband and wife taking responsibility for each other; then siblings; then tribes; and then nations. She truly believed that the key to Tikun Olum – of repairing the whole world -- starts one-on-one . . . with one good deed at a time.

This core Jewish tenet – that the promise of redemption hinges on our all pitching in to improve our world together – is what imbued Grandma Irene's life with purpose, with limitless energy, and with great joy. And it is what today's award in her memory honors. She was one of those rare people who every day of her life reached out beyond her own family to

address the needs of those around her. And she did so most often in the quietest, most unsung of ways that matter most: as the model hands-on volunteer. She was always doing for “everybody” and “getting everybody together” to lend a helping hand . . . whether it was sewing, or cooking, or even organizing salami waxing to send to Jewish soldiers overseas. And she did so for no reward or recognition, other than lifting others’ hearts and hope.

So it shouldn’t come as a surprise that when she died, the only thing in her estate that my Aunt Rozzy and my mother fought over was the needlepoint that hung in her kitchen that so encapsulated her life’s calling:

I shall walk through this world but once, and any
good I may do, let me do it now, for I shall not walk
this way again.

We are so pleased that today’s award honors a life’s work by another great hands-on devotee. It is remarkable how her contributions so resemble Grandma Irene’s. Devorah Alevsky has served in a volunteer role as the Director of Cleveland Chabad Women for 40 years. She has dedicated her time to help women find their place in the Jewish community – serving the needy, new mothers, the sick and disabled and more. Because of Devorah, thousands of mishloach manot are distributed every

Purim, hundreds of meals are prepared for free programming, women and girls are baking challot and thousands are lighting Shabbat candles.

Devorah works side by side with a virtual army of volunteers she has recruited over the years. She has developed programs for women and girls of all backgrounds with an emphasis on integrating everyone into the fabric of Jewish life. Thanks to Devorah, hundreds of young girls and women with little or no Jewish education have been inspired to embrace Judaism and live by its principles of chesed – kindness and tzedeka – righteousness and justice. So in memory this year of Grandma's first grandchild,

Come on all you people now

Smile on *this sister*

She's gotten everybody together

To try to love one another right now.

It is our honor to present Devorah Alevsky with this year's Irene Zehman Volunteer Award.