



Digital Edition

Subscribe to eNews

Subscribe to Print



about | contact

designed & hosted by:

## From Army Nurse to Public Health Advocate

by Amanda Kelly September 28, 2015



### Most Popular

#### November Happenings

It's galas galore and more this November, with chances to celebrate Israel mixed in with good times, good laughs and good family fun. First off, a reminder about the annual StandWithUs: Festival of Lights Israel Matters gala to be held this year on Dec. 6, 6 p.m. at the Hilton La Jolla Torrey Pines. Journalist Bret... [Read More »](#)

#### What is "Indecent" to You?

It seemed like a typical night on Broadway in 1923. But all hell was about to break loose. The Vice squad not only closed down the production of "G-d of Vengeance," but they arrested the producer and 12 actors, and booked them on obscenity charges. It was a travesty, and it dogged the play's writer... [Read More »](#)

#### New Pot Paradigms

So far in the lead-up to the November 2016 elections, there are two proposed marijuana legalization initiatives working their way toward California's ballot. It is expected that Nevada, Maryland, Maine, Florida, Michigan and Missouri will also have legalization initiatives on their state ballots next year. To date, 25 states (counting the District of Columbia and... [Read More »](#)

#### The Magic of Creativity

Music is cocky, prideful and intuitive. It's there when you're born, floating around for you to pull out of the air in handfuls; and music is there when you die, waiting to collect the talent that you're leaving behind. At least that's how Mitch Albom sees it. In his new novel, "The Magic Strings of... [Read More »](#)

#### Shabbos for the masses? Thousands of San Diegans participate in Unity Shabbat

There's a saying that Jews don't keep Shabbat; Shabbat keeps the Jews. Nowhere was this more evident this past week than at Shabbat San Diego. Jews in more than 550 communities around the globe including San Diego gathered Oct. 22-24 to reaffirm Jewish community, values and connections as part of the Unity Shabbat mega event.... [Read More »](#)

#### Israeli? Israeli-American? American? Why Speaking Hebrew



It was a sultry afternoon when I pulled into the driveway of Lillian Swerdlow's Oceanside home. The 93-year-old WWII army nurse, children's book author and public health advocate welcomed me warmly into her home, though throughout our conversation there persisted an undertone of modest surprise that I was there, wanting to interview her in the first place. The humility with which she looks back on her life is profound. Then again, boasting wouldn't be the sort of quality you'd find in a woman who has dedicated her life to helping people.

Recently, Rowland Unified School District in the San Gabriel Valley honored Swerdlow by dedicating its brand new dental clinic – an extension of its Family Resource Center – in her name. Swerdlow worked as a school nurse ensuring schoolchildren had access to basic medical and dental services. She credits her lifelong compassion for children to a close relationship she had with her father who came to the U.S. as a sailor for the Argentine navy. Her father, the subject of her book, "The Little Jewish Gaucho," never went back to South America.

"Most of [my students] were children of immigrant parents," she says. She also credits her success to being from Brooklyn, saying that one has to be a bit "nervy" to thrive there.

Swerdlow spent her early childhood in an "all-Jewish community." However, when she was 7 years old, the Depression hit many

working-class families in the U.S. and Swerdlow's father, a sewing machine mechanic, followed steady employment to Massachusetts. Suddenly, she became the lone Jewish child in a predominately French-Canadian community. It was not until after high school that Swerdlow returned to New York to pursue a nursing degree at Mt. Sinai Medical School.

In the midst of her training, the famous Colonel "Jimmy" Doolittle visited to recruit nurses to the war effort in Europe. Swerdlow volunteered for the U.S. Army Nurse Corps though it wasn't until June 1944 that she reported to England – just as Allied forces were invading northern France at Normandy. She remained in Europe through the end of the war.

In 1946, Swerdlow returned to New York to pursue graduate education at Columbia University. She married Leonard Swerdlow, a fellow Army veteran and "Jewish boy from Brooklyn," whom she met in Europe. The Swerdlows eventually moved west to California and Lillian began her work as a nurse at Northam Elementary in La Puente in L.A. County. Her job was to provide medical care to students, but Rowland Unified lacked adequate space for such care.

"There were no clinics in La Puente," Swerdlow says. "Many local doctors refused to take the health insurance that existed at the time for poor children."

Undeterred, she (along with the help of her school's principal) established a dental clinic in a WWII army van on school grounds.

For more than six months, the van helped deliver basic dental care to children in La Puente and El Monte, a neighboring city, but there remained a great need for an actual facility to administer physicals and basic immunizations. Swerdlow petitioned the school board to build a clinic. They accepted her proposal, with the caveat that she would have to raise the funds herself.

Somewhat daunted by the idea of public fundraising, she was soon approached by a local contractor, another immigrant from Yugoslavia, who had children in the local schools. He agreed to build the clinic for free as long as Swerdlow could raise money for supplies. With the help of her husband, a businessman who was well-connected in the community, Swerdlow reached out to established organizations like the Lion's Club and Kiwanis. Within a year and a half, Swerdlow had enough money to build a two-room facility to administer physicals and immunizations. The building would remain open in La Puente for more than 35 years until it became too dilapidated for further use.

The district eventually opened up a new clinic, in January of this year. When Swerdlow arrived at the ribbon-cutting ceremony, she found that the school district had dedicated the clinic to her.

"Of course, I cried when I saw my name on a plaque in the lobby," she says. "I was very touched that they remembered me after all

## Matters

I am an Israeli-American, raised in the US, but I didn't learn to speak Hebrew until I was an adult. Speaking Hebrew strengthened my connection to Israel, family, Israelis and even Jewish life. It helped me relate, made me more passionate about Israel's vitality, and increased my sense of ownership in Israel's future. Since then,... [Read More »](#)

>> [Digital Edition](#) <<



[afterdarkgrafx.com](http://afterdarkgrafx.com)

these years.”

They also presented her with the key to the original building that she helped build in 1978.

“It remains a community in desperate need of public services,” Swerdlow continues, “but there is now a full-functioning children’s clinic on the school grounds.”

Swerdlow remains as vivacious as ever. I found the strength of her humility matched only by the strength of her accent, which has not waned in the 50 years since she left New York City. Up until a few years ago, Swerdlow was volunteering her time at her local health department, administering physicals to those in need.

“I think there’s something in Judaism where we feel the need to pay it back,” she says. “I’ve always felt so much compassion for children...and I’m grateful that G-d gave me all these years.”