

PRINCETON MERCER BUCKS

Ewing seniors connect to the beat of a therapeutic drumming circle

by Marilyn Silverstein
NJLJN PMB Correspondent

One by one, musician/educator Sharon Silverstein distributed West African drums and other colorful percussion instruments into the hands of many of the 50 elderly residents sitting in a circle in the community room at Greenwood House Home for the Jewish Aged in Ewing.

There were 20 *djembe* drums, several a-go-go bells, Brazilian nut-shell clusters, West African shakers made of beads and hollowed-out gourds, an Irish frame drum known as a *boram*, crescent tambourines, maracas, egg shakers, triangles, percussion sticks, a *guiro* scraping instrument from the Dominican Republic, and a wooden scraping instrument from Vietnam in the shape of a frog.

"This is a drumming circle," Silverstein told the residents from Greenwood House and the adjacent Abrams Residence assisted-living facility, as the Sept. 29 activity got under way.

"A drumming circle is a place for us to come together to share our

nity. It can reduce stress and anxiety, and it's good for reminiscing and fine motor skills.

"This is intensive," she said, indicating the drumming circle, "so I put out our higher-functioning, more alert residents in the front."

"This is really something different," observed Joan Kritz, director of social services, as she joined the scene. "I don't have experience first-hand with this, but I've heard it is therapeutic. I think it's certainly something very different from what the residents are used to."

Whole-brain experience

In fact, Silverstein said in an interview before the session, there are proven health benefits to drumming. "It facilitates healing in mind, body, and spirit," she said. "It's a way for people to come together in a hands-on, rhythm-based event and share and collaborate and connect with one another through the spirit of rhythm."

"It's about the vibrations penetrating at a cellular level," she added. "It creates a whole-brain experience, incorporating the left and right sides of the brain. A whole-

room soon filled with a cacophony of sounds. "That sounds, in jazz terms, like a train wreck," she said with a smile. "Instead, we are going to collaborate with each other. We're going to start with simple heartbeat sounds, and wherever it takes us, it takes us."

Soon, headrock heartbeat rhythms filled the room. "Do you hear the difference between competition and collaboration?" Silverstein asked the residents. "You can express what you want to say through the drums."

As the drumming circle beat to a

close, many of the residents expressed what they wanted to say in another way. "I enjoyed it so much, I danced with one leg," Gertrude Silverstein said.

"It was lovely," added Esther Brightman. "Very wonderful," agreed Fay Schachter. "I enjoyed the music, just lovely to listen to." "Something different," said Ed Dubrow. "I like rhythm."

"I was impressed with the technique," said Shirley Ableman. "A lot of equipment, a lot of participation. You could see people entered into a situation that was a good release for

them.

"I found myself doing something I thought I never would," said Lee Malkoff. Rose Glantz said she found the drumming circle "very uplifting and enjoyable. I really enjoyed the music." So did Eunice Jacobs. "Anything that makes people move and be happy," she said. Added Helen Alexander: "She got everybody to participate, and to me, that's wonderful."

Sharon Silverstein's mother-in-law can be reached at msilverstein@njewishnews.com.



As the drumming circle unfolds at Greenwood House, Sharon Silverstein hands a *guiro* percussion instrument to one of the residents. Photo by Marilyn Silverstein

love of rhythm and songs," she said. "But it's not really about drumming. It's about creating a relationship with each other — a willingness to communicate, collaborate, and cooperate with each other. When we have that willingness in us from our hearts, we're able to create music together."

And with that, Silverstein began leading the residents in an hour-long series of rhythmic conversations: for example, drumming to the beat of the sounds of their names — "Shirley Ableman, boom-bah bah-bah-boom," and "Lee Malkoff, boom boom-boom," and "Irving Korgut, boom-bah boom-bah." She led them in rhythmic drumming, and answering — "boom-chack-chack, boom chack-chack" — and singing and drumming to a spirited rendition of "Hava Nagila."

The drumming circle is just one of the many entertainment programs Greenwood House and Abrams bring to all 152 residents twice each week, said program director Josephine Washington. When she first heard about the drumming circle, "I said, 'Let's do it.' It stimulates the senses — defi-

nitely helps people connect on kinesthetic, aural, and cognitive levels, all together.

"I see it as healing at the level of the heart," she said. "It's very primal, very tribal. It helps people reconnect to the very first sound they heard — their mother's heartbeat. This is the type of music that is just very, very healing to the soul."

Drumming circles are just one of the ways Silverstein fosters such experiences. A certified New Jersey teacher, she is founder and president of Living At Peace, a company that offers self-improvement workshops for children, parents, and teachers. She is a certified educator in such courses as Redirecting Children's Behavior and Redirecting for a Cooperative Classroom. A singer/songwriter, she lives in Hillsborough with her husband, Robert Silverstein, an orthodontist practicing in Somerset, and their eight-year-old son, Jared.

As the drumming circle continued to unfold, Silverstein asked the residents to sound their instruments at will. "Let's hear what it sounds like when we're not cooperating with one another," she said, and the