



Steve Moses, Gary Soiref, and Dave Schwartz at their card game. / STEVE MARANTZ

Ties that bind create a full house around the poker table

BY STEVE MARANTZ([HTTPS://JEWISHJOURNAL.ORG/AUTHOR/STEVE-MARANTZ/](https://jewishjournal.org/author/steve-marantz/))

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Jewish tradition takes a dim view of gambling, which makes the Epstein Hillel School in Marblehead an unlikely inspiration for poker.

Nonetheless, a venerable game now in its fifth decade owes its beating (not cheating) heart to a late and beloved Hillel educator, his wife, and friends whose children attended what was then known as Cohen Hillel Academy.

Bennett Solomon had terminal cancer when the first hand was dealt in 1986 in a gesture of comfort and solace. He passed away in 1987, at age 36, but the game continues today in support of one of its original members whose poker face belies his debilitating disease.

Dave Schwartz, a retired cardiologist whose three children attended Hillel, has multiple sclerosis.

Every other Monday evening at his Swampscott home, Schwartz hosts the game. His wife Flori, or a poker comrade, rolls his wheelchair up to the table, and Schwartz proceeds to use his one mobile limb – right arm and hand – to manage his cards and chips. Another mobile appendage, his jawbone, contributes cheerful chatter and commentary.

“One of the nice things about the poker group is that it adapted to my needs,” said Schwartz, 71. “We used to rotate the game among our homes. With my mobility issues everybody comes here and it’s a nice social activity, which would be difficult or impossible if I needed to go somewhere else. So it’s a bit of a support group for me. Which circles back to its original purpose for Bennett.”

Solomon, a Philadelphia native, had become principal of Hillel in 1978, when it was in the basement of Temple Israel, and oversaw its move into its current home on “the Hill” adjacent to the Jewish Community Center.

After Solomon’s cancer curtailed his recreational basketball at the JCC, he looked for a diversion. Solomon’s wife, Sue, had grown up in Philadelphia with a father who relished his neighborhood poker game. She suggested a game to her husband and his circle of friends.

“When we learned Bennett had progressive cancer, the poker game was started to be a comfort and friendship ring for him as he deteriorated,” Schwartz recalled.

Original players included Schwartz, Bruce Haskin, Kip Abelson, Sam Zell, Julian Rich, Bruce Yudewitz, and Solomon. All had children attending Hillel and/or belonged to Temple Sinai. Several players’ wives – Sue Solomon, Flori Schwartz, the late Sue Abelson, Carol Haskin, Arlene Zell – were closer-knit than the poker group.

Stakes were low – \$20 won or lost was the limit – while camaraderie was high.

“I was new to the area, and I felt lucky to have found this group of guys,” Schwartz said.

Schwartz and his wife came to the North Shore in 1985 when he joined The Medical Group in Beverly as a cardiologist. His resume included a faculty position at the University of Pennsylvania medical school, research and clinical work for the National Institute of Health, a residency at Duke University School of Medicine, a medical degree from Albert Einstein Medical School, and pre-med at the University of Rochester.

Schwartz arrived with a proud Jewish identity baked in from his youth. As a high school student in Utica, N.Y., he was president of United Synagogue Youth at the local level, then regional, then national-international. As a high school senior, he enjoyed expense-paid travel to USY functions throughout the United States, Canada and Mexico, and considered becoming a rabbi.

“When I moved here, USY was nonexistent in Marblehead and Swampscott,” Schwartz recalled. “The focal point, for kids and families to link together, was Hillel. The poker game ended up being an extension of that.”

Over the years the lineup evolved. It now includes Steve Moses, Webb Primason, Howie Seligman, and Carl Goodman. Two more current players, Gary Soiref and this reporter, played poker as high school buddies in Omaha. Alan Sidman, Jason Leffler and Journal editor Steve Rosenberg have played. Another current player, Bill Stibel, met Sue Solomon a couple of years after Bennett’s death. Stibel married Sue and joined the game, and the two unions lovingly endure. “The game just gives everyone a break from whatever it is they’re dealing with in daily life – it doesn’t have to be an illness,” said Sue. “It’s a way to take a deep breath and have some laughs.”

Flori Schwartz voiced gratitude for the connection the game provides her husband. And perhaps because she sees life through her lens as a development officer for Combined Jewish Philanthropies, she is especially effusive about a “rainy day fund” to which group members contribute before each game.

“Over the years that money has been used to provide comfort to each other’s families, and for many Shiva meals,” Flori said.

Schwartz was diagnosed with MS in 1995, but his condition was unknown to the poker game until he had to retire from his medical practice in 2012. Up to then, he was often a late arrival due to his evening hospital rounds. The location of the game rotated until 2018,

when his symptoms left him largely confined to his home. (The game went on pandemic-hold from March 2020 until June 2021.)

“How does being a Jew help you handle this?” I asked him.

“I don’t know if I do,” he said, with a self-deprecating smile.

“Seriously, I think it’s the focus on certain principles and values that allows one to try to acclimate oneself to the disability.

“You’re taught to focus on what’s really important in life, whether that be relationships and family, or ethics and morality. Yes, it’s nice to be able to walk and run and ski and play basketball and perform your own daily activities. But even if that’s given up, you still have the cognitive capacity, the intellectual capacity, the conceptual capacity, to think.”

His steadfast attitude also owes to his background in clinical medicine, he pointed out.

“I had patients who had to accept limitations, now I have limitations,” he said. “What’s the alternative? You either accept it and continue, or let it overwhelm you.”

He recalled a recent game when his hand of three Kings and three 10s lost to Webb Primason’s straight flush in a game of seven-card stud.

“A few years ago, I would have been pissed. But I said, ‘Look at that. Isn’t that nice.’ Esthetically, a straight flush is a beautiful thing. Now I appreciate it a little more.” ☹



(<https://gloucesterstage.com/>)

One Response

Susan Rubin

June 19, 2023 at 11:18 am (<https://jewishjournal.org/2023/06/15/ties-that-bind-create-a-full-house-around-the-poker-table/#comment-17579>)

says:

My nephew has MS. This is inspiring, and beautifully written. So many lessons to be learned and the power of friendship prevails! Thank you Steve!

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