

LITA AND IRWIN TALBOT

Artists of Reinvention



Life is about choices, and the Talbots—Irwin, 93, and Lita, 82—have no regrets about their decision to continue to reinvent themselves rather than retire. This reinvention perpetuates a life-rhythm of refocusing, reflecting and ultimately repurposing what they have learned for the benefit of others.

They also have no regrets about choosing to stay in their Hillsdale home of more than 50 years. Many seniors settled in Bergen County after World War II and, like the Talbots, have no interest in heading south or west. Many built their homes here, raised and educated their children here, have doctors who know them here, have community commitments here, have good friends and neighbors here, and the truly fortunate have family nearby. It is familiar.

By Kelly Parr



Despite these valid reasons, there is no doubt staying in suburban Bergen County presents challenges for seniors. While the Talbots still love the Hillsdale home they built and the fact that the town's population still hovers around 9,000 all these years later, they have long been aware that staying in their home as they age would not be easy. Indeed, much of Lita's career has focused on geriatric issues and programs.

A healthcare management consultant with more than 25 years of experience as a professor at schools of social work and medical schools and administrator at several university teaching hospitals, Lita currently serves as president of the Board of Trustees of the Commission on Accreditation for Home Care (CAHC) New Jersey, an accrediting body operating in all 21 state counties that has helped establish standards and assign accountability in the growing home care industry.

Over the years, Lita has provided expert testimony for attorneys on healthcare issues and chaired state commissions in New Jersey, New York and Maryland. She was honored as a Social Work Pioneer by the National Association of Social Workers for her contributions to the profession. She has been a hospital liaison and consultant to nursing homes and community agencies and has been affiliated with the United Nations Global Aging Committee. She also developed, received and implemented a million-dollar grant at the University of Maryland Medical School, "Long Term Care for the Elderly," a home-based geriatric care program with community support systems.

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input." According the State of New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development report, *Population and Labor Force Projections for New Jersey: 2010 to 2030*, the state's 65 and over population is projected to increase by 62 percent between 2010 and 2030. The 65 and over set, the report projects, will represent 19.9 percent of the state's total population in 2030, up from 13.5 percent in 2010. In Bergen County, the elderly population is projected to represent 21.8

of the Institute for Learning in Retirement (ILR), to seek input from Bergen County seniors. At present, both Lita and Irwin, a Saint Peter's University School of Business Administration Professor Emeritus, are advisory committee members of the ILR.

As part of the college's Seniors in Suburbia community engagement initiative, they put together a panel and questionnaire seeking to learn more about why Bergen County seniors stay and the



The S4S class and Board members at the commission ribbon cutting.

percent of the total population by 2030.

Six years ago, Lita was appointed to the Bergen Community College Advisory Board's Division of Continuing Education. She repurposed her knowledge and experience and teamed with Dr. Ilene Kleinman, at that time director

issues they face. For a year and a half, they presented to senior groups throughout the county's 72 townships, conducted focus groups and even brought in Bergen Community College students to help the larger groups of 300-400 seniors respond to the questionnaire using stu-

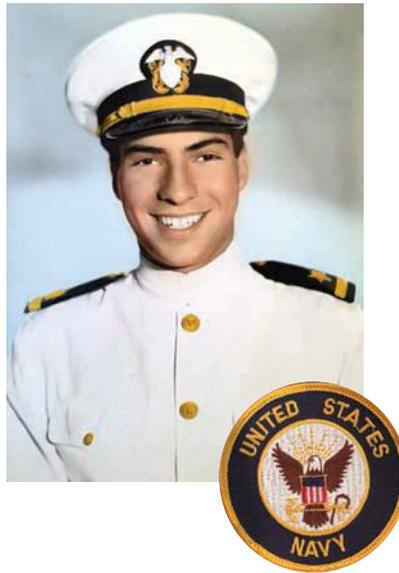
dent response systems or “clickers.” Representatives of various Bergen County agencies were also invited to attend.

Five key issues surfaced: high property taxes, unaffordable housing, poor transportation from town to town, non-walkable towns (except Englewood, Ridgewood, Westwood and Teaneck) and the reality that if they died at home it could be weeks before someone found them. Most important, seniors felt invisible in their communities.

Despite these challenges, the Talbots consider themselves fortunate—they know how to advocate.

Like Lita, Irwin knows his way around senior issues and state and local government. A World War II Naval officer combat veteran who received a commendation from the Army for his efforts commissioning officers while at St. Peter’s, Irwin in the past served as associate director of Senior Services for Bergen County. In this role, he coordinated grant funding and was a public affairs liaison to government, social agencies and communities. He has developed and implemented position strategies for Congressional and Gubernatorial campaigns and was one of the authors of the charter of Union County. He is a past trustee of the Board of the Visiting Homemakers Home Aide Service of Bergen County.

After leaving the Navy, Irwin owned and operated a real estate company in New York and New Jersey. He went on to become senior vice president in a New Jersey mortgage banking institution. While in this position, he completed his Masters of Public Administration degree at New York Univer-



sity (NYU). Yet another stress-filled day of market fluctuations prompted Lita to ask Irwin what he would like to do if he could do anything. “I think I’d like to teach” was his answer; “then do it” was hers. They ran some numbers and determined they could make things work on her salary and savings. He then resigned from his position and focused on his courses. He went on to earn his PhD in Public Administration from NYU as well, and subsequently taught at colleges and universities in New Jersey, Maryland and Michigan.

In the late 1970s, when it was still far more common that the husband’s job dictated where a family lived and for the husband to do most of the business travel, Lita accepted a position at the University of Maryland Medical Systems as an administrator and in the Schools of Medicine and Social Work as a professor. Just as Lita encouraged Irwin to continue his education so he could teach at the college level, he fully supported her pursuit of this career opportunity. They rented a Baltimore apart-



ment, and Irwin would head down for long weekends or she would fly up to New Jersey. A tenured professor at St. Peter’s at the time, he taught as an adjunct on Thursday evenings and Fridays at Johns Hopkins University and Baltimore University. They commuted for 4½ years.

Always taking advantage of their relationships and collective experiences and expertise, Lita’s latest reinvention focuses on empowering other county seniors to become advocates, too. As a result of the Seniors in Suburbia programs, Dr. Kleinman and Lita began to develop a program to train seniors as advocates for their concerns and issues. As president of the CAHC Board, Lita was instrumental in establishing the nonprofit’s Seniors for Seniors (S4S) as a consumer education program, which is part of CAHC’s mission. The program has a simple goal: “To empower senior citizens with knowledge and advocacy tools so they can function as effective change agents on senior issues.”

To achieve this goal, the program provides seniors with intensive training to equip them with the knowledge and methodologies to articulate senior needs and solutions to the public, elected officials, government representatives and the media. “The program aims to help give seniors a voice in their communities by effecting change through advocacy,” explains Lita.

Don Winant, the executive director of CAHC, and Professor Lou Ruvolo, director of Graduate Business Programs, St. Peter’s University and CAHC Board trustee, are the co-founders of the S4S training program. The inaugural cohort of 11 students, which included Irwin, completed this training in May 2016. The other 10 students were recruited and vetted through program advertisements, email blasts or personal contacts.



Classes were held in CAHC's Saddle Brook offices, and instructors included Ruvolo and the following senior services experts and elected officials:

- William "Pat" Schuber, former County Executive of Bergen County; Assistant Professor, Fairleigh Dickinson University; former New Jersey State Assemblyman and Mayor of Bogota
- Dr. Joseph V. Doria, Jr., Dean of the Caulfield School of Education, St. Peter's University; former Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs; former New Jersey State Senator (District 31) and former New Jersey State Assembly speaker
- Senator Loretta Weinberg, New Jersey State Senator (District 37) and Majority Leader and New Jersey State Assemblywoman
- Maura DiNicola, Bergen County Freeholder and former Mayor of Franklin Lakes
- John Birkner, Mayor of Westwood; Bergen County Utilities Authority
- Lynn Bartlett, Executive Director, Housing Authority of Bergen County
- Grace Egan, Executive Director, New Jersey Foundation for the Aging
- Ria Sklar, Director, Special Services, Bergen County Schools and creator of SAAFE (Save Abused and Frail Elderly)
- Linda Cross, Division of Senior Services, Bergen County; Coordinator, Bergen County SHIP (State Health Insurance Program)

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- Julia Stoumbos, Program Officer, Taub Foundation
- Renie Carniol, Director, Grotta Fund for Senior Care

Curriculum covered services for isolated seniors, home health care, caregiver needs, economic insecurity, housing and elder abuse. Helen Hamlin, a member of the International Federation on Aging at the United Nations Economic Commission and chair of the NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) Committee on Aging for Europe International Task Force, was the graduation speaker.

Since completing the program, graduates have experienced the realities of advocacy with its roadblocks, speed bumps, detours and encouraging green lights. Westwood has a significant senior

population and a supportive mayor in John Birkner, explains Lita. An advocate who lives in the community's senior housing is a member of the senior advisory council and serves on the transportation committee. Two advocates, a retired trial attorney and a retired vocational disability therapist, were inspired by instructor Ria Sklar's talk about elder abuse and decided to focus on elder scams and abuse. They have done presentations for groups and organizations, as well as taught a class at Bergen Community College.

Another advocate, a retired computer science professor, and Irwin have not made as much progress as they hoped with their Neighbor to Neighbor idea to establish phone chains for isolated se-



A SAS class in progress.

niors or for senior advisory committees in their Bergen County towns. However, their efforts have unearthed some valuable information about existing police department programs. Police departments in Leonia, Teaneck and Westwood, for example, offer “life forms” for seniors to list all medications, health issues and emergency contacts to post on their refrigerators and have the option of giving the police a copy too. Such forms make essential information readily available to police and other emergency services providers. The Westwood police also offer lock boxes for seniors to put on their doors so the police do not have to break into the home in emergency situations. In Hillsdale, seniors can sign up to call police to check in on a daily basis. Police will follow up if a call is not received.

“Like us, not all seniors have children, and even those who do often find they are scattered across the country or even the world. And, sadly, some parents and children have frayed relationships and don’t talk,” says Lita. “Life is tough enough for those seniors fortunate enough to have children who live nearby and are willing and able to help them with big and small challenges alike,” Irwin adds.

The Talbots, who met in Nantucket, became engaged six weeks later and married three months after that, recently celebrated their 54th wedding anniversary. They have traveled to more than 125 countries and have made lasting friendships. What is far more valuable to Lita and Irwin, however, is



Lita (right) with her sister and mother.

the multicultural, modern family they have built over the years.

Lita’s father died when she was young. She and her sister were raised by a single Jewish mother in Queens, New York. Her sister and brother-in-law, who are both blind, never had children either, but he has a big extended Italian Catholic family that includes Lita and Irwin in holiday meals and family celebrations. A close friend Lita met collaborating on a women’s committee has a daughter who now considers them, and calls them, grandparents, as does her husband.

While at St. Peter’s, Irwin mentored a Tunisian doctoral candidate, “daughter” Chanez. When Irwin asked her not to call him “Dr. Talbot” anymore, she agreed as long as she could call him “dad” instead. Her two sons consider them grandparents. A young woman originally from the Philippines is their second “daughter,” Delia. Irwin had the honor of walking her down the aisle at her wedding, and her husband has since become a “son.” They also have two English godchildren, now adults, and travel companions who have become dear friends.

The lessons learned in the field and through student and presenter feedback have been used to tweak S4S curriculum and class size for the second program, which will start in late September. Lita would like to see future participants include members from diverse age groups. “The senior issues the program graduates hope



Chanez with her two sons.

to impact will not be solved quickly or easily, and many impact the population at large, not just seniors,” adds Irwin.

Lita and Irwin credit one of the inaugural program members with the best explanation of advocacy they have ever heard. “When you decide to bake a cake,” says Lita, “you identify the necessary ingredients, gather the ingredients, then identify the best baker to bake it and sell it. S4S advocates are learning to bring ideas and ingredients to the best bakers.”

Lita and Irwin believe that when life is good to you, you should give back. They hope their latest reinvention helps give county seniors a voice and that the pioneering S4S program is someday replicated throughout the state and nationwide. ☞



Interested in joining a future S4S session?

Contact the Commission on Accreditation for Home Care, Inc.

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