

## A Moving Experience: JET Program Connects Volunteers and Older Adults

By Kelley Carpenter, JFS

Volunteers for Jewish Family Services' JET Express transportation program who provide rides for older adults, never know who they might meet or what they might learn during their journey.

As a new employee of JFS, it was my privilege to tag along on some recent rides with JET clients and volunteer drivers. My job was to learn more about this incredible program and write about my experience. The hope is that when people like you read this story, you will want to share this amazing experience and become a JET volunteer. I can tell you, after my day with JET, I am ready to sign up!



JET Express provides safe and reliable transportation for older adults who no longer drive, and are residents in portions of Johnson County, KS. and Jackson County, MO.

On a recent hot June day, JET volunteer Scott, looked forward to the drive to pick up local celebrity, Sonia, 97, star of the 2016 documentary "Big Sonia." Since I saw the movie several years ago, Sonia has been one of my heroes. Her story touched me deeply.

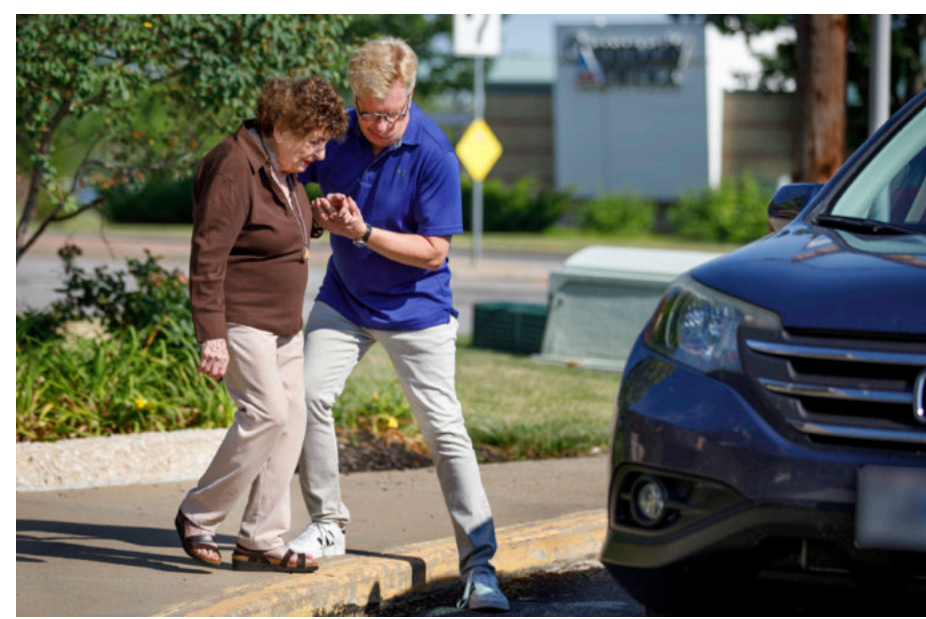
For Scott, picking up Sonia from her tailor shop featured in the movie and driving her home after her workday was a complete honor and he was elated to be able to visit with her. Like me and so many people in Kansas City, Scott had come to learn Sonia's inspiring story of survival in the movie. Sonia is a Holocaust survivor who spent many of her teenage years in concentration camps.

When I found out the night before that I would be meeting Sonia, I couldn't sleep. Sometimes, our heroes don't always live up to our expectations. But meeting Sonia was one of the most meaningful experiences of my life. As a former journalist who also double majored in history, I keenly understood that I was blessed with the exceptional opportunity to talk to a woman who had lived through a part of our history that must never be forgotten. To be able to write about my experience was a gift.

Sonia is remarkably sharp, and her personality is upbeat. Despite all she went through, she always looks for "the silver lining" in life. She dispensed pearls of wisdom and book recommendations throughout her short journey home. She is grateful for the safe transportation to get around, as her caring and supportive family recently asked her to give up driving her beloved Oldsmobile following a minor accident.

"I think maybe God was good to me, because I didn't get hurt," Sonia says. "I made it through all those horrible things, and this isn't the worst thing," she said, patting Scott on the hand. "Everybody wants to give me a ride now," she chuckled.

Cars equal independence and hanging up those car keys can feel like the end of an era, especially for strong, active people like Sonia. The award-winning JET Express program keeps older adults ages 60 and older active and independent, and helps families get their older loved ones where they need to go safely and with care.



But this program does so much more, in that JET connects generations and people in so many ways. Each journey during my ride along was like getting a life lesson while giving someone a ride. I could see the warmth of the volunteers, and that they were getting as much out of the human connection as I was. The rides were short but filled with so much meaning.

As they drove, Sonia directed Scott on her preferred route home from the passenger seat. Along the way, she talked about the state of the world and her hopes for younger generations to learn from history.

"Our younger generation needs to learn history," Sonia said. "If you don't read and learn, it's easy to get brainwashed. This is the reason we have so much hate in the world. We are only visitors on this planet. We need to remember that."

When we reached her house, Sonia sent me away with a huge hug and made sure I wrote down the books I needed to read. She also wouldn't let Scott and me leave until we took some little coffee-flavored hard candies. I was so touched, I saved them on my desk to remind me of her. Both Scott and I were so happy to just to be in the presence of this amazing person who had survived so much and was so gracious in sharing her story and her wisdom.

After helping Sonia safely to her door, Scott reflected on being a JET volunteer for the past 8 months. He feels like he gets as much out of every journey as people he drives to their appointments do.

Fellow JET volunteer Brenda feels the same way about the connections she has made with the older adults she has driven as a JET volunteer. She appreciates being an "extra set of eyes" on the JET clients, many of whom are living alone. Brenda enjoys being a surrogate family for JET client, Gitla, whom she drove home from the Jewish Community Center. Like Sonia, Gitla, is a Holocaust survivor and a favorite JET client for multiple volunteers, even though she has a regular volunteer driver.

"We're like back up family," said Brenda. "We're connecting with them and helping enable them to live independently. Sometimes you might be the one person who notices an issue or concern and alerts a social worker that someone needs some extra help. I love being able to give back and be that special person for an older adult."

JFS greatly needs more volunteer drivers for the JET Express program. To find out more about JET, please visit our website at [www.jfskc.org](http://www.jfskc.org) or email us at [volunteer@jfskc.org](mailto:volunteer@jfskc.org). You can make a difference in just a few hours a month. Providing transportation is incredibly fulfilling, volunteers say.

"As much as it helps someone get places, it makes me feel good," said dedicated JET volunteer Susan, who has volunteered since September 2021, and drives an average of three days a week for the JET program.

I rode with Susan, another JET volunteer, as she picked Gitla up from her home in the morning and dropped her off at the Jewish Community Center. Like Scott, Susan considered it an honor to spend even just a little bit of time with Gitla and hear her story.

"I love learning about people," Susan said. "I try to imagine myself when I'm that age, and what a great thing it would be to be able to get out of the house and get your hair done or see people you know. I get as much joy out of it as they seem to. I try to make them happier than they were when they got into my car when they get out."

Kelley Carpenter is the Senior Marketing Manager for JFS.

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MAR 20 Mon	11:30 am Mindful Monday @ Virtual
MAR 22 Wed	11:00 am The KeshetKC Mobile at Kansas Cl... @ Kansas City Public Library
MAR 23 Thu	6:30 pm Community Conversations - Addict... @ JFSKC Brookside
MAR 27 Mon	11:30 am Mindful Monday @ Virtual

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