



The Center Players

of the JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER OF VERONA

**Document courtesy of the Lilyan Dretel Museum & Resource
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The Center Players of Verona was a theater group formed by members of the Jewish Community Center that mounted many productions from the 1950's to the 1970's.

The following is a letter from Lee Lang, a member from the early decades of the JCC and good friend of Lilyan Dretel. She reminisces about the 1940's and '50's and about the origins of the Center Players of Verona.

Monday 2/28/11

Thanks for the JCC Bulletin, I think it is going to be a wonderful affair, and I shall try to recall some of the high points of our life in Verona back in the early days.

When Howard and I moved there in 1947, the JCC had the "old building" at the same site on Grove Avenue. It was fairly small two-story house with the main room on the first floor and the social hall upstairs. We met Rabbi Alter Kriegel and his "wonderful wife Ida" shortly after we moved to town when they visited us at home and invited us to join the synagogue. It was the lovely warm reception they gave us that made us join and become an active part of the JCC.

One thing I remember about the "old building" was the gathering we had there after the Yom Kippur service was over, the whole congregation got together to break the fast and it was a wonderful way to meet with our friends. That building was the place that the first group of budding thespians got together to put on a series of short skits to entertain friends and family. I remember one act that included Lou Mayer, Lew Meyers and Marty Friedenfeld in grass skirts and flower leis doing some sort of dance, they brought down the house. It was the era of miming to a popular record and I sang, "I'm Just the Girl Who Can't Say No" from one of the popular Broadway shows.

I guess we got the bug then because shortly after that we organized the "Center Players of Verona" and planned our very first production of "John Loves Mary," a very popular post WWII Broadway production. That took off then and we followed with "Arsenic and Old Lace," "Mr. Blanding Builds His Dream House," "Mr. Barry's Etchings," "Anniversary Waltz" and other I can't remember. Some of the active players were Henry and Florence Rose, Lilyan and Joel Dretel, Bea and Irv Newman, Lee and Howard Lang, Lew and Gert Meyers, Judy and Ken Hyman, Lee and Art Pierce, and Rolfe Evenson who was still in high school but a great addition.

We built scenery, sewed costumes, scoured resale shops for props and mostly borrowed from our homes for the furniture. After a few plays we moved to the High School on Fairview Ave to do the plays and I still remember one play we didn't put on but participated in was the town's 50th anniversary when Rolfe Evenson wandered through from time to time muttering "we have to do something about the traffic on Bloomfield Avenue." The grand finale of that great production was the appearance of Miss America

who happened to be from Verona and she came down the aisle in all her glory wearing the beautiful Miss America gown and of course the crown!!!!

During that time Lilyan Dretel and I talked about opening a nursery school at the JCC and Rabbi Kriegel was a strong backer of the plan, so in the mid-1950's we made the big move. We were able to use the Sunday School room at the JCC and the clever plan we had was to build "cubbies" which were just divided book style shelves for the children to use as lockers. We purchased brightly colored tables and chairs that we shared with the Sunday School students. At the close of the week, we simply turned the cubbies around to face the wall and that closed the school for the weekend. It was called Kinderschool and I'll bet that there are several local folks who can remember going there when they were of pre-school age (Debbie Dretel being one of the very youngest).

We had three-year-olds for two days per week and the four-year-olds came for three days. Bea Newman joined us shortly after that and the school flourished into the 1960's. I moved from Verona in 1960 and Bea took over, she and Lilyan ran it for several years after that. It was a great addition to the community and we were very proud to be a part of it.

One other thing I remember was the shopping on Main Street and especially Evenson's Department Store. It was our main source for most of our basic clothes, especially the children's department. I remember shopping for shoes for my youngest, Sandy, and Lennie Goldberg was the shoe clerk among other things, always came to wait on us and he would present to her, the most beautiful array of high heels in the fanciest styles, never making a joke of it but keeping a serious face all the time. Of course she ended up with sensible kiddie shoes but we never forgot his kindness and sense of play.

I hope some of this will be useful; it was fun to remember those days and how fortunate we were to have lived in Verona and been a part of the Jewish community there.

Love,

Lee