

Jane and Marc Nathanson:

AN EMPATHY FOR FAMILIES

BY IDELLE DAVIDSON



Photo by Bruce Hershey

Jane and Marc Nathanson study the room. They note the natural light streaming through the opaque glass wall, designed for privacy. The area is small but carpeted. Aside from a phone, a sofa, two leather chairs, and an alcove with shelves for spiritual material, there is little else to catch the eye. The space might appear austere to some, yet the cluster of furniture and the rays of sun give off an intimacy, a feeling of calm.

This is one of five meditation rooms the couple has funded in the Cedars-Sinai Saperstein Critical Care Tower. There is a similar room in each of the public lobbies on floors four through eight. Each is just a few feet from the intensive care wards so that families of critically ill patients have a place to meditate, pray, or just gather their thoughts.

The Nathansons, who live in Los Angeles and own a second home in Aspen, are keenly aware that meditation rooms are often filled with people who are sick with worry. Within seconds of entering this place, Jane has plumped up the pillows on the sofa. For the Nathansons,

literally stepping in and claiming a sense of ownership in every commitment they make is nothing new. They have been giving to the community and to the world at large for decades. “I think when you’ve been fortunate—and Marc and I have been very fortunate—it’s important to give back,” says Jane. “I can’t imagine not getting involved in something bigger than ourselves.”

“We are so grateful to the Nathansons. These rooms are a Godsend,” says Samantha Stewart, MSW, LCSW, clinical social worker for the Intensive Care Unit. “When people step into this world, those they love are hooked up to tubes and have tape on their faces, and monitors are beeping. There are ventilator alarms and other frightening noises. Their mother or father or sister or brother doesn’t look like he or she normally does. It just shakes a family’s world upside down.”

Rabbi Levi Meier, the Jewish chaplain at Cedars, refers to the meditation rooms as “a spiritual oasis where families can reconstitute their strength to help the patient recover.” Denise LaChance, the Christian chaplain, knows that the

privacy of the meditation rooms also shield a family from the indignity of expressing grief publicly in the waiting room. “They need quiet to pray, to think, to sort things out, to make decisions, to cope,” she says.

The muted sunshine flowing into the room is no accident, says Peter Hendrickson, an architect and director of facilities at Cedars. “Natural light is a healing process, not just in the mediation rooms but throughout Saperstein,” he says. “This is all part of the art of medicine in the 21st century.”

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Because Jane Nathanson is a licensed psychotherapist in private practice, the couple found the emotional component of their gift especially appealing. The two have long championed erasing the stigma of mental illness. They fund the Nathanson Family Resource Center at the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Hospital, where all mental health services for families are free of charge. Jane is a trustee of the UCLA Medical Center.

Jane and Marc support numerous health causes, including prostate cancer research at Cedars-Sinai and diabetes treatment and education for the underserved of Los Angeles through the University of Southern California. They were early advocates of AIDS/HIV research. In memory of Jane’s mother, the Nathansons fund the Dr. Erika Meldola Fallek Fellowships at Hebrew University in Israel. The program pays for medical students to attend UCLA/Cedars-Sinai for advanced training. They also endow a chair in breast cancer research at the Weizmann Institute in Israel, in memory of Jane’s father, Fred Fallek.

But the Nathansons feel a special connection to Cedars-Sinai. In 1945 Marc was born at the early Cedars of Lebanon Hospital. There, his uncle, Morris Nathanson, served as head of medicine. Their youngest son, David, was born at Cedars-Sinai as were both their grandchildren, Andrew and Katherine. Coming full circle, Marc’s father

passed away at the Medical Center. “So, we have happy and sad memories here,” he says. The Nathansons’ son, Adam, sits on the Cedars-Sinai Board of Governors.

Jane and Marc Nathanson met each other 44 years ago in freshman speech class at the University of Denver. “She was very beautiful, exciting, vivacious, and had a great sense of humor,” Marc says, grinning affectionately at his wife, who grins right back. “She stood out from all the other girls.”

Marc founded and for 34 years served as CEO of Falcon Communications, the nation’s 10th largest cable television operator. It was sold in 1999 to Paul Allen’s publicly traded Charter Communications, where Marc is now vice chairman.

It appears that Marc has transmitted his love for the broadcasting business to his sons. Adam owns more than 30 radio stations in California and Oregon; David heads TVG, an interactive horseracing network owned by Gemstar/News Corp. Their daughter, Nicole Swiger, taught special education and she is now a full-time mom.

Marc Nathanson continues to lead by example. In fact, it’s almost impossible to fathom how this pleasant, affable man manages his time on any given day. Among other responsibilities, he is a trustee of USC Annenberg School for Communication, UCLA Anderson School of Management, and Pardee RAND Graduate School. He is also vice chair of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, a publicly and privately funded organization that supports democracy in developing nations. In 1998, President Clinton appointed Marc to chair the United States Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), which oversees Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, Radio Free Asia, and Radio/TV Marti. He served through 2002. Both he and Jane are active in Democratic politics.

Even his for-profit company addresses public health. Falcon Waterfree Technologies produces water-free urinals. “Water is a precious resource,” says Marc. “We need to conserve it.”

In the Nathanson household, family comes first. Then comes community, with healthcare philanthropy topping the list. “Nobody is immune to illness,” says Jane. “We live here—all of us—and we need to take care of each other and make our institutions, our hospitals, better and stronger.” ■