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Seniors | Vibrant 100-year-old a whiz at mah-jongg, bridge

BY **EMMA SILVERS** | OCTOBER 4, 2013

Florence Borkon, 100, waves off any suggestion that she's led an interesting life. A moment later, she casually mentions that one of her earliest memories is of running to see triumphant soldiers marching down the streets of Chicago after returning from the First World War. (She was 4 or 5 years old, and she fell and hit her head in her excitement.)



Florence Borkon photo/emma silvers

About 20 years later, she opened a chain of ladies' hat shops — Florence's Hat Shoppe — around Milwaukee and Chicago. She also worked for Sears, Roebuck and the Berkeley City Ballet. She has “retired” five times.

She can still tell you how to do the Charleston, and can definitely school you in mah-jongg and bridge.

And yet: “I've led a pretty simple life,” says Borkon, who's diminutive in stature but energetic as ever during an interview last week in her Berkeley apartment.

Born in Chicago in 1913, Borkon (nee Rosenberg) was the eldest of four children and the only girl born to Jewish immigrants from Lithuania. The family lived in a Jewish

neighborhood on the city's West Side and, prior to the stock market crash of 1929, was comfortably middle class. Her father owned a successful scrap iron business; her mother stayed home and made "the most wonderful homemade breads and cookies," Borkon remembers.

The family was observant, keeping kosher and attending shul regularly. But Borkon, who attended Northwestern University, also knew how to have fun. "I loved school, and there were always football games and parties," she says. "We would go out dancing; there were a lot of musicians coming out of Chicago in those days.

"And the fashion — I had the flapper dresses, covered in fringe and everything. There's one in particular I wish I still had!"



Borkon (front) at her hat shop in 1940

She married Oscar Borkon, a law student, and they lived in Chicago and Milwaukee; the latter was home base for their main hat shop, which was open for 20 years. Their daughters, Elaine and Marilyn, were born in 1940 and 1945, respectively; the family moved to Midland, Texas, in 1955 in part for the warmer weather. "Bush country," says Borkon with a small smile. "Marilyn went to school with Laura Bush." There, Florence worked in billing for what was then known as Sears, Roebuck.

Her husband died in 1975 and, following both her daughters' leads, Borkon relocated to the Bay Area in 1985. But while most people in their 70s might think it was time to retire, she found work in the office of the Berkeley City Ballet, where she remained for 12 years.

She also began volunteering at the Jewish Community Center of the East Bay, where she still plays mah-jongg once a week. "I've made so many truly great friends through the JCC," she says.

She's been such an integral part of the community there for nearly three decades that the center threw her a 100th birthday party this past August. Among the attendees at

the luncheon were many members of her far-flung family — she has four grandchildren and six great-grandchildren, the youngest born in May. Our need for donations is not unique, but our reporting on COVID-19 is.

On Fridays she plays bridge at the Albany Community Center. Borkon also has regular mah-jongg games with friends in her home at Redwood Gardens, an independent living facility just off the U.C. Berkeley campus that's home to people of all ages — including her daughter Marilyn who lives floors below her.

As for how she stays so spry at her age? “I don't have any secret,” says Borkon. “I stay active, I try to do things I enjoy, I take one day at a time.”

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Emma Silvers

Emma Silvers is a former J. staff writer.

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