

This is the latest installment of “Growing Older & Wiser in Brookline.” Readers are welcome to suggest local age 60+ people to be profiled in future articles to author Miriam Rosalyn Diamond at mdiamond@brooklinema.gov

“The most extraordinary things happen unexpectedly” – Growing Older & Wiser in Brookline Longtime Brookline resident **Ilene Epstein** and her identical twin Sandy were born 85 years ago in Brooklyn, NY. They, along with older sister Barbara, survived a difficult childhood due to their mother’s illness and frequent hospitalizations. After graduating high school and unable to afford full time higher education, Ilene worked in law offices and took classes at Queens College and Fordham University. When they were young adults, Sandy moved to London with her husband and children. It was difficult for the twins to be separated, and they began a lengthy and detailed correspondence. The letters included a running commentary on a range of topics in tumultuous years of the late sixties and early seventies; marriage, raising children, women’s lib, discovering Julia Child, the state of politics and culture. Through this communication, the sisters continued to provide each other with support and unconditional love. During that time, Ilene married and started her own family, a daughter and then twin boys. After eight years abroad, Sandy returned to the U.S. and settled in Brookline. Ilene followed and moved here two years later. The sisters and their best friend Marcie opened The Studio, a women’s clothing store that became a Brookline institution. Ilene recalls it as a comfort zone that was “a tremendous success, very gratifying in many ways. It brought a lot of happiness to a lot of women.” The grateful owners remained connected to the community, organizing fundraising events to benefit the Coolidge Corner Theater and the Dana Farber Cancer Center. The Studio remained a Brookline fixture for forty years. The partners closed the shop in February 2020, only to face the start of the COVID emergency. Ilene found dealing with retirement and the epidemic at the same time jarring. Hoping to find a new purpose in something creative and challenging, she enrolled in a Brookline High School art class. “It’s so therapeutic when you are engaged with something that demands all your attention and requires all the skills you are discovering you have.” She finds drawing to be healing, similar to meditation. Much of her time these days is engaged in reading, cooking, working out and “spending time with the people I care about most.” There are several writers in her family, and Ilene enjoys that craft as well. Having been a marathoner, she also treasures daily walks, often happily encountering former customers. She devotes time each day keeping up with current events and politics by reading and listening to newsletters, podcasts, and sending postcards urging people to vote.

When the sisters discovered Brookline’s Senior Center, they - along with Sandy’s husband - joined the Wise Aging group. Ilene finds it helps her become “more self-aware, self-examining, and strong.” She feels “touched and moved” by stories participants share; as a result, she has shifted from “tolerance to patience” in dealing with others. The meetings provide her with opportunities to learn about “adapting to change.” Ilene values “anything that can help with the reservoir of ingredients that help one cope with life. I’m very proud of Brookline for creating the Center. It’s been enormously rewarding.” Ilene considers her family, including six grandchildren, her major source of happiness and pride. She has come to recognize that she has less time ahead of her than what is behind. She finds “each decade brings you to another level. If you were a thinker, with age you become a philosopher.” She is inspired by the memory of her sister Barbara who died three years ago. She also is encouraged by former President George H.W. Bush’s leap from an airplane at age ninety, as well as others who continue to challenge themselves over the years. At this stage, she feels she can wisely advise her children. Her legacy to them includes the “buckets of letters” from the years that she and Sandy lived on different continents. The sisters are looking forward to creating a book for the family so that current and future generations can learn about their lives and the historical context of their experiences. Over time Ilene has learned “to be confident because you are stronger than you think you are. Persevere. Don’t be intimidated by the next challenge that’s coming up.” She also maintains that “the most extraordinary things happen unexpectedly - I’ve seen it over and over again.” She identifies patience as a key resource during challenging times. “Just wait and hold back when you want to jump in. Don’t give up on someone. Things have a way of working out. And above all, don’t give up on yourself.” - Miriam Rosalyn Diamond, PhD