

# 'Family' of different faiths gathers to pray for Philippines

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When executives at the Jewish Home at [Rockleigh](#) asked the 77 Filipinos on the staff what the nursing home could do to help in the wake of the devastating typhoon in their home country, their reply was unanimous: “Pray for us.”



CARMINE GALASSO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Residents, staff members, family and friends took part in a somber service at the Jewish Home at Rockleigh on Tuesday.

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And when the workers were asked if they had a particular clergyman in mind, again they were unanimous: the Jewish Home’s own rabbi, Simon Feld.

Feld’s message, delivered to more than 100 staff members, residents and their families in the home’s chapel on Tuesday, was simple. “We care,” he said. “What makes the United States great is not our powerful military might, it is not our oil or our riches. It is those two little words: We care.”

A communications blackout in the wake of the powerful storm in the Philippines — believed to have left as many as 10,000 people dead when it tore through the central islands of the Pacific nation on Friday — had most of the staff members wondering throughout the weekend about their families back home. But phone calls started coming in on Tuesday afternoon, with much of the staff learning that their families had survived the storm.

A few, however, had not yet heard from loved ones.

“We are very concerned,” said Sunni Herman, executive vice president of the home. “We care very much.

“All these staff members are like family to us,” she said, her eyes glistening in an apparent effort to repress tears. “They treat our residents like family, and they are family to us. Of course we are going to help.”

Those in attendance Tuesday gathered in the nursing home’s spacious chapel for prayers, singing, some crying — but mostly for a feeling of communal support. In addition to recitations of biblical verses expressing thanks to God and asking for God’s protection for those in distress, the home’s nursing director, Eric Riguerra, offered a prayer in Tagalog, the indigenous language of the Philippines.

“Everyone comes together here,” Feld said. “When one hurts, we all hurt. Here, it’s one for all and all for one.”

Herman said it was not surprising that the Filipinos on staff elected to hear from the resident rabbi instead of a clergyman of their own faith. “He counsels everyone here, residents and staffers alike,” she said.

During the service, one of the home’s residents, Shirlee Stern, who was a middle school librarian before she retired, read a poem she had written in pencil in her small spiral notebook an hour before the service.

“Don’t despair, you’re in our hearts forever,” she read, her voice shaking with emotion. “We hurt for you, we grieve for you, we cry for you, we bleed for you.”

“I only wrote words that I feel from my heart,” she said later, her eyes filling with tears as some of the staffers bent down to her wheelchair to thank her for participating in the service.

Tears were evident throughout the service, but perhaps never more than when the Filipinos on staff rose to sing the national anthem of the Philippines, “Lupang Hinirang.”

“Land of the morning, child of the sun returning with fervor burning, thee do our souls adore,” they sang in Tagalog. “Ever within thy skies and through thy clouds and o’er thy hills and seas do we behold thy radiance, feel the throb of glorious liberty.”

The tears were punctuated by moments of joy. Those at the service broke out in applause when Fernando Mendoza, a night nursing supervisor, announced that he had heard from a nephew that his sisters and their families, who live 20 miles north of the path of heaviest destruction, were safe.

“They are all safe,” Mendoza said, but added: “Like everyone else, they are in desperate need of water and food and shelter.”

The nursing home did more than offer prayers in its effort to help: By the end of the service, \$565 for typhoon relief had been left in a hastily contrived donation box, including a hundred-dollar bill from one of the home’s residents, Harold Cohen. “On behalf of the residents, thank you very much,” Cohen said to the staff members who were at the service.

Nearly \$11,000 more poured in at a donation page on its umbrella organization’s website, [jfnnj.org/typhoon](http://jfnnj.org/typhoon), which promised that 100 percent of the money would go to direct relief.

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