



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jose M. Serrano

Emily Kessler

JOSE M. SERRANO May 13, 2015



Women of
DISTINCTION
HONORING WOMEN IN NEW YORK

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Award: HONORING WOMEN IN NEW YORK

Year: 2015

Emily Kessler, a resident of the Upper West Side of Manhattan is a Holocaust survivor who grew up in Ukraine. She was born in 1917 in the small town of Khmilny in western Ukraine. In 1941, Nazi officers came to Ms. Kessler's home and killed her family. Ms. Kessler, a young widow of 24, had to prepare to escape with her 2-year-old son.

Ms. Kessler survived a Ukrainian labor camp without any food or water and eventually escaped with her young son. She lived on the run for two years before relocating to Kyrgyzstan. Despite all she had been through, Ms. Kessler was able to graduate from college and worked as an editor for a publishing house.

When Ms. Kessler was 60, the anti-Semitism in Kyrgyzstan escalated and she immigrated to the United States. Although in a better place with more opportunities, Ms. Kessler did not know anyone in the United States and barely spoke English. She struggled to find happiness while putting her life back together. It was not until one day in 1985, while walking in Manhattan, where she saw a mandolin in the window of a music store, and realized that it was time to stop mourning and begin to play the instrument which brought her so much joy.

In November 2014, at 97 years old, Ms. Kessler had the distinct honor of performing the mandolin and singing songs in Yiddish and Russian at Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall at the 80th Anniversary Benefit Gala for the nonprofit organization Blue Card. Blue Card is the only organization in the United States exclusively dedicated to providing assistance to Holocaust survivors.

Ms. Kessler, now 98 years old, is also a cancer survivor and has overcome two broken hips. She continues to play the mandolin throughout Manhattan and inspires others through her perseverance, music and words.