

Learning From the Heart helps fill the void

BY RICH MONETTI

Linda Lief Altabet, founder of a special needs Hebrew School, hopes that a new program at the Mount Kisco Hebrew Congregation is the beginning of a trend. Currently, she said, the Jewish community as a whole is just beginning to address the lack of services she now provides for six families of special needs kids who want their children raised in accordance with their beliefs.

She found a dearth of programs when she was trying to find a Hebrew school that could cater to her daughter's communication delay.

"It's put me on a mission to fill this void," said Ms. Altabet.

The program found its genesis as Ms. Altabet sat and waited for her daughter in the occupational therapist's office. There, she would meet other Jewish parents who were also expressing frustration and anxiety over what was lacking in day school programs for their children. Fearing like many other parents that her daughter would never be bat mitvahed, Ms. Altabet came to the realization that the day school option was not going to meet her child's needs, so she said, "If I can't find what I want, I'm going to create what I'd like."

Ms. Altabet began gathering information by talking to other congregations that had special needs Hebrew schools, and any other professionals or individuals who might be able to help. She found the most difficult part was to find special education teachers with a Hebrew background. Since one of the students hoping to attend was deaf, a therapist was needed who could teach Hebrew with qualifications for working with the hearing impaired.

That was like trying to pull a rabbit out of a hat, she said, but once that fell into place, Ms. Altabet's background



Linda Lief Altabet with some of her students.

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as an artist and art teacher provided the final piece she needed to complete the sensory integration program that she was trying to create. She said she had "no doubt" that she could make the transition into this type of instruction with all her years of experience at the Rippowam school teaching art in addition to the many college workshops and art program she's done.

The LEV, or Learning From the Heart program, currently has six children enrolled ranging from preschool to second grade, with three staff members, and aspires to continue growing.

One local woman has funded the entire program for this year, which demonstrates the importance of this type of program to many people in the area.

She keeps the door open to children who otherwise might be left out.

Sometimes out of fear of having their children ostracized within the community, parents don't tell Hebrew school directors that their children are in need of the same types of services they get during the week in public school. "That child's needs aren't addressed, and then they don't want to come," said Ms. Altabet.

Not the case at Learning From the Heart, as her six students have come to learn how to interact with each other while learning both Hebrew and sign language. "Young children — that's when you can turn children on to their faith," said Ms. Altabet.

"It took several months for them to bond with each other," she added, and now they all seem to prefer Sunday school to regular school.

It's been a challenge, though, as preparing lesson plans mean doubly adapting her art background to Hebrew studies and special education. "It's very hands on," she said.

Her biggest concern after putting together a qualified staff was whether she could get enough parents to sign up with the same level of enthusiasm she and her colleagues have for the program. "The parent has to want the child to have a Jewish education, and if you're convinced that should happen, then the rest falls into place," she said.

"And in this case every parent here is on board," she said. But the issue is still a touchy one with some people. That's why she's not afraid to talk about it and even see her own daughter's picture in the paper, her hope being that it will make others say that this is OK, and "why are we making such an issue of this."

For more information on the Learning From the Heart program, call Ms. Altabet at 666-2292.