

(09/29/2006)

Filling An Education Gap

Throughout Westchester, a bunch of after-school Jewish programs for children with special needs are sprouting up.



Merri Rosenberg - Special To The Jewish Week

Several years ago, when Lisa Chorne of Armonk began looking for an appropriate after-school religious program for her son, Evan, she found few options to accommodate his special education needs.

"I felt that my synagogue was unable to put together a suitable program," Chorne said. Although she enrolled

Evan, now a 9-year-old fourth grader, in the synagogue's religious school for a couple of years, "when it was time for him to advance, I had a different concept of what he needed."

Historically, after-school programs suited for special-needs children have either been non-existent or merely cobbled together for individual congregants whose children had disabilities such as Asperger's syndrome, delayed speech or other developmental problems.

However, over the past few years, a number of programs have begun to emerge with an eye toward catering to young people with special needs.

"It has been encouraging to see the growth of educational programs for Jewish children in Westchester, both within the framework of the synagogue/day school and independent programs, that individualize instruction for children and allow them and their families to experience the joy of Jewish learning and living," said Irene Lustgarten, director of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York/Westchester Center.

Today, a number of programs are on offer: Matan, a non-denominational national not-for-profit organization that provides educational opportunities for Jewish children with special needs, offers programs at several county locations, including one at Temple Beth Abraham in Tarrytown; the Jewish Community Center of Mid-Westchester in Scarsdale offers a seasonal Sunday program tied to the Jewish holidays, a special education pre-school program for designated Westchester county children and after-school programs for children with special needs; and the JCC on the Hudson in Tarrytown has a variety of programs for children ages five to 12.

One such JCC program is Shalom Chaverim, a once-a -week session for kindergarteners through second graders that offers Jewish-themed activities and a curriculum designed as an introduction to Hebrew school. The JCC also has plans to offer a summer camp for children with special needs beginning in the summer of 2007.

And that's not all. Temple Israel Center in White Plains offers three after-school classes as well as enrichment services and remedial services in the mainstream classes.

"This temple is extremely committed to providing a Jewish education to all students," Michelle Steinhart, director of student services for Temple Israel Center, said, noting that they accept students from other synagogues.

Children with special needs enrolled in Temple Israel's program attend one fewer day than the other students but are included in the school's activities like music, prayer and assemblies. The self-contained classes, usually kept at about five students, are designed to help children who may have attention deficit disorder, learning disabilities or autism.

"So far, we've had 16 successful b'nei mitzvahs," said Steinhart. "Most were in the standard Torah service. Only a few — about three or four — did a modified service."

Even nursery schools are getting into the act. Recently, a pilot program known as Project SEED (Supporting Early Emotional Development) has received funding from the UJA-Federation of New York Westchester Program Services Cabinet to support six Jewish early childhood programs in the county. Through the program, The Board of Jewish Education/Westchester Center in partnership with Westchester Jewish Community Services will provide the training program for teachers at several Jewish nursery schools.

Frustrated by her own difficulties finding an appropriate after-school program for her daughter, Linda Lieff Altabef decided three years ago to start LEV, which is housed at the Orthodox Mt. Kisco Hebrew Congregation.

"This is the only exposure to Jewish education for all of them," said Altabef, a certified art teacher who also teaches in the program. "I want them to feel good about who they are and about being Jewish. They all want to be bar or bat mitzvah. It's worked beautifully."

Funded in part by a UJA-Federation grant and private donations, the program serves 15 students who learn Hebrew prayers and Jewish culture from a staff of teachers and specialists trained in dance movement and occupational and speech therapy.

Lisa Chorne, whose son Evan has been enrolled in the program since its inception, is certainly pleased. "Linda is serving a niche for high-functioning, special needs children," said Chorne. "What Linda has developed is a multi-sensory approach. It's a lot of fun and an amazing experience. She's doing a total mitzvah."

And, best of all, Chorne said: "Evan is having exposure to Jewish culture, Jewish identity and spirituality. Linda imparts that. We feel so welcomed."