

CONNECTIONS

News and information for a Jewish community that includes individuals with disabilities and special needs

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Pittsburgh, PA

Fall 2013



Do you know a young adult who wants to become more independent but needs considerable support because of multiple disabilities?

Jewish Residential Services (JRS) is partnering with Verland, a reputable agency with a long history of serving individuals with complex needs, to create a new group home in Squirrel Hill offering 24-hour care, seven days a week in an environment that celebrates Jewish culture, with a kosher kitchen and Shabbat meals.

For more information, contact JRS at 412.325.0039 x 103 or info@jrspgh.org.

Turn to page 6 for an article entitled "Young Adults to Open Fresh Chapter in Life at New Squirrel Hill Residence."

In this Issue:

Keeping Work Fun at Friendship Circle..... 2

An Extra Memorable Bar Mitzvah..... 3

Jewish Residential Services: A 20-year Retrospective 4

Inclusive Religious Education Curriculum Introduced 5

Calendar..... 7

Pittsburgh's Inaugural ReelAbilities Film Fest to Raise Disability Awareness on the Big Screen

By Patti Murphy

Perceptions of disability are bound to change in good ways when the first ReelAbilities Film Festival comes to Pittsburgh October 26-29. Presented locally by the Pittsburgh Jewish Film Forum (JFILM) and FISA Foundation, ReelAbilities began in 2007 in New York City to raise awareness and appreciation of the lives, stories and artistic expressions of people with disabilities. The festival has been held in 13 cities since its inception and is the largest of its kind. Films featuring actors facing physical, intellectual, sensory and mental health challenges celebrate the disability experience and universal themes such as accepting life's ups and downs, overcoming adversity and finding happiness.

Plans to host the Pittsburgh festival took root when FISA (The Federation of Independent School Alumnae), a grantmaking foundation committed to improving the lives of women, girls and people with disabilities in Southwestern Pennsylvania, approached the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh about the possibility. The federation got its JFilm program on board. JFilm executive director Kathryn Spitz Cohan knew of the success of the New York festival because her colleagues at the Manhattan Jewish Community Center were its founders. She saw a golden opportunity in partnering with FISA to have a festival here. "FISA is totally plugged into the disability community," she said. "JFilm is totally plugged into the arts community in Pittsburgh."

During the festival, seven thought-provoking and visually stunning narrative and documentary films made in Argentina, China, France and the United States will be shown at accessible venues around the city. Tailored supplemental programming at each screening will include guest speakers, panel discussions and art installations.



A scene from "Anita"—winner of the Audience Award for Best Narrative at the 2010 JFilm Festival and coming to Pittsburgh for an encore at the ReelAbilities Film Festival in October.

Films were selected from dozens rated by a previewing committee of 50 individuals. One film familiar within the local Jewish community is "Anita"—winner of the Audience Award for Best Narrative at the 2010 JFilm Festival. Set in Buenos Aires, it captures the poignant inner journey of a young Argentinian woman with Down syndrome separated from her mother after a bomb explosion at their Jewish Community Center.

"Anita" will be shown at 7:30 PM Sunday, October 27 at Rodef Shalom Congregation, where there will be a reception at 6:30 PM.

That afternoon, a series of short films will be shown at the Human Engineering Resource Laboratory at Bakery Square in East Liberty. Tours of the laboratory will then be offered.

Festival venues—which also include the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild for Saturday night's kickoff and the Frick Fine Arts Building on the University of Pittsburgh

continued on page 6

About Connections

Connections newsletter is published by a consortium of six agencies with the mission of encouraging, supporting and recognizing the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in all aspects of Jewish life in the Pittsburgh community. *Connections* also provides information about a wide range of resources for individuals with disabilities and their families.

CONNECTIONS

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All Hands on Deck at the Friendship Circle

By Rivkee Rudolph

Beginning last year and expanding in the 2013-14 year, FC has opened a new opportunity, allowing members to participate in behind-the-scenes planning of activities and overall background organizational work. Its first year has been wonderful as members truly become a part of all the inner workings at FC and it also allows for the "everyday staff" to have regular input from and regular communication with our members. The greatest benefit to all is that it keeps our professional office environment fun and friendly!

Here's a quick word from two of our fabulous office workers:

Amanda



"Hello everyone. My name is Amanda Diaz. I am 19 years old. I am currently working at the Friendship Circle office for Rivkee Rudolph and Rabbi Mordy Rudolph. When current event information needs to be shared, members of Friendship Circle call me. I am the Friends on the Town advisor, so it is my job to make phone calls, and decide what activities and trips we will offer. At our dinners, it is my job to manage the head count. My favorite part of my Friendship Circle work is doing the mailings for special events. As part of a professional atmosphere, I get to dress up and be fashionable. Friendship Circle accepts me for who I am. When I finish my work at the end of the day, all the staff have a smile on their face. I feel special and needed every time I go into the office. I love Friendship Circle."

Amanda Diaz was born in Washington, D.C. She graduated from Mt Lebanon High School this past spring and currently attends City Connections. Amanda has two brothers, Adam and Jason.

Benjamin



"My name is Benjamin Moshe Pollon and I am 20 years old. I am happy when I work at the Friendship Circle in their office because it makes me feel like I can help people like myself, and make people happy. Working at the Friendship Circle makes me happy too because I like all of the people who work there. They are really nice. Sometimes I work on the computer and it makes me feel great. I also welcome new members and it makes me happy. I like going to Friendship Circle events because I have fun and everyone is nice. Rivkee and Mordy are nice people because they gave me a chance to work and have fun helping people. Thank you for all you have done for me. I feel lucky when I work at Friendship Circle! I enjoy working with you!!"

Benjamin graduated from Quaker Valley High School in 2011, where he lettered in varsity bowling. He lives in Sewickley, PA with his mom, dad, sister and pets. He also has twin brothers in college. A big part of his life has been spent in the hospital having surgeries, but is, thank G-d, doing well. He really likes Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC, and the doctors and nurses there. His hobbies include bowling, reading, playing video games, attending Pittsburgh Pirates and Penguins games, and spending time with his family and friends.

Contributed by Rivkee Rudolph, director of The Friendship Circle.



Joyful “Twin” Bar Mitzvah “Meant to Be” for Cousins

By Oliver Zunder

My Bar Mitzvah story began 13 years ago. My cousin and I were born only 18 days apart. Even though we did not live in the same city, we grew up together. It didn't take long, however, before it became clear that our lives would be very different. When we were three years old, Ethan was finally diagnosed with a disorder called Angelman syndrome. This makes it almost impossible for him to read and speak, and very difficult for him to learn. As well, he suffers from developmental delays.



Although Ethan is not able to conduct his own Bar Mitzvah, he has the right, like every other Jewish boy or girl at the age of 12 or 13, to enjoy this special day. It is for this reason that I chose to “twin” my Bar Mitzvah with my cousin. I also knew how meaningful this experience would be for my aunt and uncle and our whole family.

As I began to prepare for my Bar Mitzvah many interesting things occurred that made me certain that our B'nai Mitzvah was meant to be. First, my Torah portion was a double portion, as though two people were meant to share this day. The text of these portions also included a passage that referred to how we are expected to treat deaf and blind people. I realized that this reference to handicapped people directly connected to Ethan.

I decided to further analyze this passage in my D'var Torah because I had a lot to share about my relationship with Ethan with my friends, my family and the congregation. Having grown up with Ethan, I have always been sensitive to the fact that he wasn't able to do many of the things that I could do. I have come to realize that,

even if Ethan and I can't carry on a conversation together, we can connect with each other in so many other ways. We ski together, we swim together, we laugh together, we enjoy movies together, and we also shared this special day with one another. I also came to understand that there are many other ways to communicate with someone other than through our words. We just need to “listen” more. Because of my unique relationship with my cousin, I have learned that just because a person has special needs does not mean that we have to treat them differently. They deserve our respect, our attention and our friendship.

It has also taught me to appreciate the simple things that I am able to do and sometimes take for granted. Many kids complain about the amount of work that goes into preparing and studying for their Bar or Bat Mitzvahs. Of course, I was one of those kids at times, but then I would remember how lucky I am that I have the ability to learn and speak the words, both in Hebrew and in English and complete the tasks of this amazing Jewish ritual.

Our memorable day took place this past April. It was an incredible day for all of us. I chanted my Torah and Haftarah readings, delivered my D'var Torah, and Ethan participated as best he could, by trying in his own way, to repeat certain words, by holding the Torah and by sharing the bimah (pulpit) with me. For me, this was very important because it showed that just because he has special needs, does not mean he could not participate. He was so happy all day and I could tell that he knew that it was a special day

in his life. It was also a very meaningful day in my life, which was made even more significant because I was able to share it with my cousin.

What also made the day meaningful is that my family decided that they wanted to be Ethan's voice. My cousins, aunt, grandfather, mother, father and brother all participated in the service by reading Torah. It was amazing that everyone participated in the service on Ethan's behalf. As you can imagine, it was an emotional day for everyone and there were many tears shed by friends, family and even congregants. Happily, I think that they were tears of joy.

Many people told me that what I had done was a real mitzvah, but for me, my cousin and I were just sharing this very significant day in our lives together. From my perspective, this experience enriched both of our lives, as well as that of our family. I know that I will remember this day for the rest of my life.

Oliver Zunder is a volunteer at The Friendship Circle.



JRS Pushes Forward: 20 Years of Building an Inclusive Community

By Deborah Friedman



Jewish Residential Services (JRS) recently celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the opening of Leonard Staisey House, an apartment living program serving eight adults with a history of persistent mental illness. When Staisey House opened, JRS was a young organization formed in response to clear evidence that for people with disabilities and their families, opportunities for participation in the life of our community were far too limited. People with disabilities (and their families) felt invisible, overlooked and marginalized. And sometimes they felt angry about it.

JRS came together in an effort to change that. The founding board committed itself to creating programs and services in Squirrel Hill for individuals living with psychiatric or intellectual disabilities so they could establish and maintain dignified, stable lives for themselves as valued members of the community. To that end, the agency has worked over the years to establish a variety of programs – residential, rehabilitative and social, all aimed at helping people with disabilities acquire the skills and confidence they need to lead full and satisfying lives. Our residential services have grown to now serve 53 people, with three apartment programs housing 22 residents, and the others living in homes or apartments scattered throughout the neighborhood. We established a psychiatric rehabilitation day program, Howard Levin Clubhouse, that now serves 120 individuals who are working toward recovery from mental illness. JRS also has several informal social programs for people with disabilities interested in making friends, improving their social skills and participating in community life, as well as periodic educational programs for family members.

We are proud of the work we do and the contribution we've made to Squirrel Hill, to

the Pittsburgh Jewish community, to the individuals we serve and to their families. Yet we know we have much more to do. Recently, our board and staff came together to develop a new strategic plan that we will use to guide us through the next 3 to 5 years. In the process, we crystalized and refined our vision, as follows:

JRS is working toward an inclusive and interdependent community in which people of all abilities can thrive and contribute to the benefit of all.

We restated our Mission:

JRS supports individuals with psychiatric or intellectual disabilities, helping them to live, learn, work and socialize as valued members of the community.

And we reaffirmed our values:

- *JRS builds on Jewish culture, values and traditions while being welcoming to all.*
- *JRS believes that individuals with mental health diagnoses can recover, and lead full and fulfilling lives.*
- *JRS believes that all individuals can learn grow, and contribute to their community.*
- *Life*

Finally, JRS has committed itself to focusing on increased inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the life of the community. By that, we mean not only expanding our services and capacities, but also working to encourage the larger community to become more welcoming and accepting of people of all abilities.

JRS has already initiated work on two very exciting new projects: First, in partnership with ACTION-Housing, recently we acquired the site of the former Poli Restaurant and the parking lot across the street, near the

corner of Forward and Murray avenues. Our goal is to create new space that eventually will house the JRS offices and the Howard Levin Clubhouse on the lower floors, and affordable housing for individuals with disabilities on the upper floors. This project will take a number of years to reach fruition, but will give people with disabilities who want to live in Squirrel Hill an opportunity never before available.

The second project, in the works for several years, reflects the effort of JRS to develop programming for young adults with disabilities who have transitioned out of school and into the adult system of services. One critical need JRS has identified is for housing for young adults with intellectual disabilities and complex care needs. To address that need, JRS is partnering with the Verland Foundation to develop a small group home in the heart of Squirrel Hill. It will be licensed by the State, have round-the-clock staff, and will provide high-quality care, a Jewish environment within the home, and opportunities to participate in all aspects of community life. We are actively working to secure an appropriate, fully physically accessible home. This home will be open to individuals who have consolidated waiver funding.

This is an exciting time for JRS. As our new programs unfold, we hope not only to provide more and better services and opportunities to individuals with disabilities, but also to help the broader community appreciate that a culture of inclusion enriches us all.

For more information about JRS and its programs, please visit our website, www.jrspgh.org or call 412-325-0039.

Deborah Friedman is the executive director of Jewish Residential Services.



New DVASH Curriculum: Reading, Writing and Reaching All Children in Hebrew Schools

By Terry Feinberg Steinberg

Agency for Jewish Learning
Director of Special Education Services

Jewish tradition tells us that as a child learns to read, the teacher covers the letters in honey, making learning sweet. The student then traces the letters, tasting the sweetness of Torah and learning, using a multisensory approach. When we read from the Torah, we use the Yad to guide us through the text. We are not allowed to touch the text with our own hands, yet we are given a tool to help us read. Though we use this multisensory approach when reading the Torah as children and throughout our adult lives, the approach is not implemented in our classrooms.

Twenty percent of students in the general population have learning disabilities. Of these young people, 70%-80% are diagnosed with dyslexia. Fifty percent of those students have a dual diagnosis of dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Reading is rocket science, according to Dr. Louisa Moats, whose research focuses on reading, spelling, and language education, as well as teacher preparation. Most recently, she was a contributing writer of the Common Core State Standards. Reading, as Dr. Moats says, is a learned skill, not one we are born with. For 1 out of 5 students, reading is a struggle. Imagine how hard it is for a six-year-old student with dyslexia who has never heard or spoken Hebrew to learn to read it.

Generally, Hebrew schools support those students with learning disabilities through a resource room or with a tutor outside the classroom. Estimates for Pittsburgh religious schools indicate that 35% of these students not including those who drop out require this segregated learning experience. While this type of support may meet the students' instructional needs it does not promote inclusive practices in Jewish institutions.

To creatively address the need to accommodate individual learning styles, two Agency for Jewish Learning staff members, have created Dynamic Vision for the Active Study of Hebrew (DVASH), a new approach based on comprehensive research that includes elements of letter and vowel recognition, vocabulary, and writing. DVASH incorporates visual, oral, touch and kinesthetic modalities into the learning process. The goal is twofold: to reduce the number of students who need to be pulled out of the regular classroom while improving Hebrew education for students with and without disabilities.

Funded by a grant from the Jewish Federation of Pittsburgh Foundation, two Hebrew classes from Beth El congregation in Mt, Lebanon and two from Ohav Shalom congregation in Allison Park are piloting the DVASH curriculum this fall. AJL staff members Vita Nemirovsky, Special Education Consultant and Reading Specialist, and Terry Feinberg Steinberg, Director of Special Education Services, will support the teachers with extensive professional development and classroom modeling to bring this exciting idea into reality. Please contact Terry at 412-521-1101, ext. 3206 for more information.



Fun night out with a serious twist: Camaraderie among colleagues took center stage when Jewish Residential Services held its annual recognition dinner for board and staff members at Buca di Beppo in June.



Friends enjoyed cookouts at Leonard Staisey House all summer long.



Young Adults to Open Fresh Chapter in Life at New Squirrel Hill Residence

By **Jenny Wolsk Bain**

Jewish Residential Services

Like many young adults, Rachel Glynn was eager to take charge of her own life when she got her diploma. She looked forward to moving out of her childhood residence and into an apartment with other women her age. Because of intellectual disabilities, however, she would continue to need help with meal preparation, decision making, and transportation, so her transition required careful planning, as chronicled in *Rachel in the World* (University of Illinois Press, 2007), her mother's memoir.

"If she were your child," wrote Jane Bernstein, an English professor at Carnegie Mellon University, "you would not look into the future and wish for nothing more than a bed in a heated room." Bernstein imagined a home where Rachel could grow to reach her full potential, have more independence, and socialize with peers while receiving necessary support. Thanks to perseverance, good luck and advocacy from a social worker assigned to the case, Rachel found a suitable placement and is now living with two roommates in an apartment that is staffed around-the-clock.

Bernstein is one of several parents on the board of directors for Jewish Residential Services (JRS), a local nonprofit organization that helps families of adults with disabilities. Concerned about the obstacles encountered during the transition to adulthood, JRS is currently working with Verland, a reputable agency with a long history of serving individuals with complex needs, to create a new group home in Squirrel Hill offering 24-hour care, seven days a week in an environment that celebrates Jewish culture, with a kosher kitchen and Shabbat meals. "This is such a great neighborhood," Deborah Friedman, executive director of JRS, notes. "We want to create more opportunities for inclusion so that relationships are preserved and individuals can stay connected to local synagogues, the JCC,

the Friendship Circle, and other resources in the community."

JRS and Verland have been looking at potential properties—existing homes and empty lots in close proximity to the business district, and with sufficient space to ramp exits and park a van—and has already identified at least one promising property. Meanwhile, the agencies are reaching out to families who have expressed interest and working with synagogues and local agencies to compile a list of prospective residents. Compatibility is important and one of Verland's responsibilities will be to match individuals, taking into consideration age, gender, personality, needs, etc.

While JRS and Verland are working together to secure funds to cover capital expenses, they will rely on state grants known as consolidated waivers to run the home. Consolidated waivers are available to eligible individuals with intellectual disabilities. Unfortunately, there is a long waiting list for these grants so not everyone who currently needs housing can afford it. "Funding is a major challenge for families of adults with special needs," says Friedman, who, in addition to leading JRS, is involved in 21 and Able, a United Way of Allegheny County initiative to explore a range of residential models. "We see this new group home as an important part of a larger agenda to promote inclusion in the fabric of Jewish life," she says.

For more information, contact JRS at 412.325.0039 x 103 or info@jrspgh.org.

Jenny Wolsk Bain is the program manager for Jewish Residential Services' Young Adults in Transition initiative.



REELABILITIES

continued from 1

campus—can accommodate multiple wheelchairs, Spitz Cohan said. Open captions are available for six of the seven films and other accommodations are available upon request.

The films are meant to be enjoyed by viewers with or without disabilities, said FISA program officer Shani Lasin, optimistic that the universal subject matter of the films will help to ensure that. "We're reaching a broader audience," she said.



Organizers of the inaugural Pittsburgh ReelAbilities Film Festival believe its offerings, such as "Anita" (shown above) will attract a broad and inclusive audience. "Anita" poignantly tells the story of how a bombing at a Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires, Argentina affects a young woman with Down syndrome and her mother. Lasin and Spitz Cohan agree that the festival has a key role in growing a more inclusive community.

"There's something for everybody," Spitz Cohan said. Her expectations of the festival's success won't end after the final film's closing credits roll.

"We hope that it makes Pittsburgh a better place to live."

To learn more about the ReelAbilities Film Festival, visit www.pittsburgh.reelabilities.org.

Film descriptions, scheduling and ticket information are on the website.

Patti Murphy is the editor of Connections.



Calendar

October 2013

**Saturday, October 26-
Tuesday, October 29**

ReelAbilities: Pittsburgh Disabilities Film Festival

Various times and venues.
Presented by JFilm and
FISA Foundation
For more information, visit:
www.pittsburgh.reelabilities.org.

Sundays, October 20 and 27
Super Science and Reading*
Carnegie Library 1-2:30 PM

November 2013

Tuesday, November 12
6-8 PM

"Psychiatric Support for Young Adults
in Transition" (an informational pro-
gram for families)

Jewish Residential Services
4905 Fifth Avenue in Shadyside

Presented by Jewish Family & Chil-
dren's Service and Jewish Residential
Services

Free and open to the public.
Reservations required.
Contact: info@jrspgh.org
or 412.325.0039 x 103

Friday, November 15
Friendship Shabbat*

Thursday, November 21
Volunteer Meeting*

December 2013

Wednesday, December 4
Chanukah Party*

Thursday, December 19
Dad's Night*



January 2014

Saturday, January 25
Havdalah Party*

The Friendship Circle is hosting all
events marked with an asterisk (*).
For more information, please visit
www.fcpgh.org closer to the date
of the event. An RSVP is required.
To register, email info@fcpgh.org
or call (412) 224-4440.



The Disability Experience Conference

FREE REGISTRATION!
JOIN NOW!

Who?

Students for Disability Advocacy

Where?

William Pitt Student Union
University of Pittsburgh

When?

Thursday, October 31 and
Friday, November 1

Disability Studies...Disability
Advocacy...Student Presentations

Keynote Speaker:

Kathleen Martinez,
Assistant Secretary of Labor for
Disability Employment Policy

Presentations will include assistive
technology, community inclusion,
education, employment, policy &
law, English & Fine Arts, Narrative,
and Health & Wellness

For more information, visit:

[www.pitt.edu/~sorc/disability/
Conference.html](http://www.pitt.edu/~sorc/disability/Conference.html)

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CONNECTIONS



News and information for a Jewish community that includes individuals with disabilities and special needs

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"Welcome everyone... with joy."

— Pirkei Avot 1:15

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