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SSDS celebrates a 'renaissance' New Milford school shines a light on role models

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Astronaut Charles Camarda leads sixth-grade Schechter students in a discussion about how to make a perfect space suit for visitors to Mars. photos courtesy ssds OF Bergen county

Solomon Schechter Day School of Bergen County is having a "banner year," says Shari Leventhal, president of the New Milford school.

"We went through some rough patches, but we've come back stronger than ever," she told The Jewish Standard, citing increased enrollment in both kindergarten and middle school.

Leventhal attributes Schechter's growth to innovative programming and creative staffing, spearheaded by head of school Ruth Gafni.

The choice of Daniel Jaye, former principal of Bergen Academies in Hackensack, to serve as director of academic affairs was particularly fortunate, she said, pointing out that the day school now boasts its own after-school academies.

Among its most successful new initiatives is the expert eyewitnesses and role models program, said Leventhal. The approach — which has so far brought to the school, among others, two Knesset members, an eyewitness to Kristallnacht, and the national vice president of the Jewish National Fund — is meant both to educate and inspire students, she said.

The idea of presenting students with role models is very much in the minds of school leaders. Indeed, it was with an eye toward that program that Schechter selected its honorees for this year's annual gala.

Receiving the school's Shirley and Harris Shapiro Community Award on March 27 will be Rabbi André Ungar, rabbi emeritus of Temple Emanuel of the Pascack Valley in Woodcliff Lake. The award, said Leventhal, is presented to Schechter supporters who are role models within the Jewish community.

"Rabbi André Ungar is an expert eyewitness as well as a role model," she said. "He fought apartheid [in South Africa], marched with Dr. [Martin Luther] King, and speaks out on Jewish causes around the world. He's a leader in the community, what we want our children to be."

The Tree of Life Award will be presented to Geoffrey Lewis, a parent of Schechter graduates and an active member of the school board. Samantha Asulin and Deborah Rose, Schechter volunteers and leaders of the parents' association, Ahava, will get this year's Chai Award.

The honorees "exemplify everything we're about," said Leventhal. "It's important to say thank you."

She pointed out that Lewis, "who supports Schechter at every turn, has been ... an incredible role model, giving quietly to families who need help." In addition, Rose, a past president of the parent-teachers association, and Asulin, the current co-president, "have been instrumental in putting in some amazing programs."

"The honorees reflect the myriad attributes that we strive to impart to our students on a daily basis," said Gafni, citing "worldliness; intellectual curiosity and academic achievement; Jewish learning, practice, and sensitivity; love of Israel — the people and the place; entrepreneurial and volunteer spirit; tzedakah [righteous acts; charitableness]; chesed [acts of kindness]; and derech erez [moral and ethical values]."

But besides recognizing the achievements of these individuals, the school wants to "give back" to the community, said Leventhal.

"We want to thank the community for helping us get back to this point," she said, explaining why the March 27 event is being billed as a community celebration.

"As you can imagine, we are all very excited about the great renaissance of Schechter New Milford," said Gafni. "We're thrilled that the public is taking note."



To be honored at Solomon Schechter's 37th Annual Community Celebration on March 27 will be, left to right, Samantha Asulin, Deborah Rose, Geoffrey Lewis, and Rabbi André Ungar.

Celebrating innovation, furthering Jewish values

Leventhal stressed that the school should not be identified just with academic excellence but with innovation as well.

"Not only are the kids learning, but they're excited," she said, adding that her own children — she has one in eighth grade and twins in fourth grade — come home "bubbling over."

Gafni said there is a myth "that continues to persist, which is that when parents send their children to day schools, they are somehow sacrificing on the secular side, especially in math and science."

However, she said, two-thirds of the Schechter seventh-graders who were invited to take the SAT exam last year by the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth scored above the mean of college-bound seniors in mathematics.

And this year, "some of our middle-school students are doing college-level analytic geometry using a remarkable piece of software called Geometer's Sketchpad, which we've purchased for the wireless netbooks that each middle-school student receives. And we've begun introducing Singapore Math into the elementary school in anticipation of next fall, when we switch to it completely."

According to Jaye, who wrote the math curriculum standards for New York State, "This is the 'gold standard' for mathematics instruction."

As for science, "we continue to work with Astronaut Charles Camarda and the City College of New York on the Mars Spacesuit project," said Gafni. "Schechter's seventh-grade E2K [Excellence 2000] students are involved in the revolutionary online molecular biology lab called EteRNA (<http://eterna.cmu.edu/htmls/abouteterna.html>)." E2K is a program subsidized and implemented by the Center For Initiatives in Jewish Education of enriched science and math activities.

In addition, the school has entered into a partnership with the Montclair State University science department, which sends its students to work with Schechter's new Polymerase Chain Reaction, a DNA-amplifying machine used for stem cell projects.



Studying the Talmud is seventh grader Yael Marans, left, with Judaic studies teacher Sara Stave.

Gafni noted that "just as we stretch the students, we also stretch the teachers to teach to a higher, more sophisticated level and challenge their students, which is at the heart of our inquiry-based learning approach."

Still, she said, academic achievements are not enough in themselves.

"We're justifiably proud when our students score in the highest percentiles on standardized tests, when we win the E2K International Science Competition, when our alumni are valedictorians at leading high schools, and when our graduates are accepted at the most prestigious colleges, universities, law schools, and medical schools. But it's at least as important to us when guests remark about how courteously and thoughtfully our students behave, when groups of students spontaneously create mitzvah projects, or when they manifest their Jewish identity and ethical sensitivities in their later vocations or avocations."

In addition to creating a partnership with the educational institution Mechon Hadar, the school is also establishing relationships between Schechter and local institutions such as the Jewish Home in Rockleigh.

Gafni pointed out that on Purim, "we'll be doing a school-wide chesed project to send holiday notes and mishloah manot packages to every resident at the Jewish Home."

"We're truly growing mensches at the school," said Rose. "The children are learning to care about each other. It's part of the curriculum, learning to be a good person."

The former parents' association head and Tenafly resident now works herself to recruit volunteers.

Active in the school for some six years, she has twin girls in fourth grade and one child in kindergarten.

"As soon as we got there, we felt it was not just the children's school but our community as well," she said. "We had to become involved as volunteers and give back. It's very important for children to see the kind of people we want them to be," she noted, adding that "our kids really do notice that I'm there all the time and work hard because I love it, not because I'm being paid to do it. I get a personal thrill out of helping to make their school better."

Rose said she especially prizes the school's "warm, caring environment."

"I feel an energy in the school that's growing every day and every year. The excitement over learning is really phenomenal," she said, noting that while her daughter gets everything in kindergarten that one would get at any other school, "she's also got chess and violin in her curriculum."

The volunteer, who attends an Orthodox synagogue, said that "one of the things I love is that the school is so inclusive of so many different levels of observance. They try to respect everyone's level on the spectrum."

Reviewing her own contributions to the school, Rose said there are several programs of which she is particularly proud. For “Election 2008,” she helped organize school-wide mock elections involving students of all ages.

“Every grade had a different assignment. Kindergarten made the ballots, the pre-K made stickers saying ‘I voted,’ the middle-school kids helped everyone sign in on Election Day and go into the booths, and the upper elementary students counted the ballots and learned about tallying.



Taking part in a revolutionary online molecular-biology lab called EteRNA are Schechter seventh graders, left to right, David Ezrapour, Joshua Advocate, and Joshua Randman.

“The kids were really into it,” she said, noting that they wore red, white, and blue clothing to school that day and ate red, white, and blue-colored cookies.

Rose also helped organize the “Schechter Reads” program, again involving all grades. While it lasted, students would be asked to “drop everything and read,” no matter what class they were in.

Asulin, now in her second year as president of the parents’ association and also a Tenafly resident, has two children at the school. While her kindergarten daughter appreciates “the warm, fuzzy environment,” she said, her fifth-grader likes the challenge of the dual curriculum.

Like Rose, the volunteer said she particularly likes organizing programs that involve students of different ages, since “it’s not often that all the students get together and do joint programs.”

In addition to working with Rose to revamp the school’s lunch program, providing for healthy food options, Asulin helped coordinate a project in which students earned points for performing acts of kindness. When enough points had been collected, organizers brought in the musical group the Maccabeats to perform for the students.

“In a school like ours, with so much going on at once, we rely on parent involvement and on volunteers,” she said. “It’s a nice way to show children and teachers that we are truly a community made up of kids, parents, and educators. When we work together, we are at our best. And more so than ever, we are a very strong community. I feel fortunate to be part of it.”

The role models

For his part, Ungar — the parent of four and grandparent of 16 — said the school “is doing a wonderful job.”

Three of his grandchildren attend Schechter, and he is “overwhelmed with delight at the progress they’re making, the sheer amount of learning they absorb, and the clear joy with which they run to school.”

The rabbi said that while “a lot of love and effort is invested in congregational schools,” they cannot match the offerings of a day-school education.

During his own childhood in Hungary, he said, he attended Jewish schools sustained by the community.

“We had one hour a day of Jewish studies, very limited indeed. It was part of the curriculum, like Latin and math.” It was his strong Jewish home background that grounded him in Judaism, he said.

The rabbi noted that as a Conservative Jew, he finds the “intellectual openness [of Schechter] very refreshing. They manage to be passionately Jewish and at same time open the students’ eyes and hearts to the world at large. It’s very inspiring,” he said. With all the options open to American Jews, he added, he believes this kind of education is the “prime vehicle of Jewish survival.”

Looking back at his own achievements, Ungar pointed out that he served Temple Israel from 1961 until his retirement in 2005, arriving there exactly 50 years ago.

“There were lots of things I enjoyed doing, but nothing measured up to the focus on education,” he said. “I tried to do what I could to promote Jewish education,” he recalled, expressing the wish that funds for day school education could be integrated into the Jewish federation’s budget.

“It’s as much a priority as anything else they are doing,” he said.

While he is enjoying his retirement and his grandchildren and getting a chance to read and travel more than he could before, Ungar does recall some “fairly dramatic episodes” in his life.

Surviving World War II in hiding, he received his higher education in England, earning his doctorate in modern philosophy at the University of London. He has served congregations in London, South Africa, Canada, and the United States, leading Temple Emanuel for more than four decades.

His experience in South Africa was particularly memorable. After assuming a pulpit there in the mid-1950s, he left that country in 1956 under government orders “because of saying unkind things about apartheid.” Last year, however, he not only went back to visit the country he left under duress but was able to speak from the same pulpit he had held for two years.

“Since I had recently celebrated my 80th birthday, my family thought it would be wonderful for me to go back,” he said, noting that “the country has changed and I have changed.”

Ungar said that when he lived in South Africa, the Jews there were “a scared community.” While there was no “official Jewish position, we felt that apartheid was terrible, wicked racism.”

The Jews also knew, however, that they would be victimized if they spoke up. He said that while he was never physically threatened himself, “I was told I was in some danger.”

Nevertheless, said Ungar, “among those whites who opposed apartheid, a disproportionate number were Jewish.”

Also “dramatic” was his decision in 1965 to march in Selma, Ala., with Dr. Martin Luther King. Recalling that turbulent period, the rabbi says he was “privileged” to have taken part in that event, in which he and his then pregnant wife, Judy, participated.

The Jewish Standard recently reported Ungar’s recollection of King as “a wonderful man, a great American, a true friend of the Jews. He spoke

about Moses and Amos and Martin Buber with great knowledge and passion. The world would be a better place with King alive.”

Continuing his commitment to social action, Ungar was later involved in efforts to bring about peace in South East Asia as well as in the Middle East, and worked for the liberation of Jews in Russia and Ethiopia.

Looking back, however, the rabbi — who taught philosophy at New York University, the New School, and Hofstra University and chaired the Hebraic studies department at Rutgers University in Newark — said that “my largest satisfaction was in adult education, in the humble sessions of study with adults talking about issues of Jewish concern.”

While some rabbis are “specialized,” focusing primarily on areas such as halacha or pastoral duties, “I was a generalist trying to do my bit in the various dimensions [of the rabbinate]. My ministry was to educate and to be available to congregants.”

Geoffrey Lewis became part of the Schechter community in 2000, when he enrolled his son in kindergarten. In 2005, the partner and chief financial officer of Optima Fund Management became a member of the board.

Coming to the United States from South Africa in 1986, with his son then 7 months old, “we moved to Tenafly within a couple of months and have been here ever since,” he said. While neither he nor his wife had attended a Jewish day school, it was something they wanted for their children.

He was particularly impressed by Schechter’s emphasis on teaching Hebrew as a language.

“Yes, you must read and write Hebrew to study Jewish texts, but you must also be taught a language you can actually speak,” he said.

In addition, “the school is very Zionist. That’s something important to us,” he said, pointing out that his wife’s parents and other family members live in Israel.”

Calling it “a pleasure” to work with Gafni, he said the appointment of Jaye was a “huge coup” and that the school “is well on its way to being a destination school for great academics.

“A smart person said to my son about eight years ago that you go to university to ‘learn how to learn,’” particularly since particular jobs you train for may not exist in five or six years, he explained. “If you can’t learn to adapt, you will be left behind. That kind of critical learning — asking questions, not just learning by rote — gets them prepared for future.”

He credited Schechter with embracing that philosophy, preparing its students for a lifetime of learning.

Lewis said the fact that there are no government subsidies for the secular part of a day school student’s education is “completely mind-boggling.”

“It’s an American problem,” he said, noting that such subsidies exist in other countries.

“A large number of people are paying huge property taxes,” he said. “They’re struggling in this economy to pay that and tuition.”

For himself, he said, he is fortunate to have done well professionally and “was brought up that if you have the opportunity, you need to give back to the community. I’ve chosen to do that by giving to Solomon Schechter” as well as to Jewish Family Service in Teaneck.

Lewis stressed the importance of day schools in helping to maintain Jewish identity.

“I happen to be a kohen,” he said, pointing to the study showing that kohanim share a gene not present in the rest of the population.

“It strikes me to the core,” he said. “It’s important to tell our children. Assimilation is clearly a big challenge,” threatening a “spiritual decimation” of the Jewish population. “The only way to counter that is to promote Jewish culture, education, and continuity.”

The SSDS 37th annual community celebration will take place on Sunday, March 27, at 5 p.m. at the Hilton Pearl River. For more information, visit www.schechterbergencelebration.com or e-mail celebration@ssdsbergen.org.