



The CIRCLE

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LifeTown Breaks New Ground Facility Will Offer A Wide Range Of Services, Skills Training And Social Opportunities

By Ronelle Grier, Chabad.org

For children with special needs and their families, the simplest things can be indescribably challenging: visiting the dentist, getting a haircut, making a friend. To help those families and individuals locally, LifeTown is on the way.

Livingston celebrated LifeTown's groundbreaking with 800 people gathering as Friendship Circle children laid the cornerstone of the new center. The event was marked with activities for families, speeches and the chance to help pour cement for the new building.

For 27-year-old Avi, who was one of the first Friendship Circle kids when it began in 2001 and who now serves as a volunteer, LifeTown is a dream come true. He is particularly excited, he says, for the opportunities the center will

provide, especially job-training, life-skills knowledge and social experiences.

The 47,000-square-foot, two-story LifeTown facility will include "Life Village," a simulated main street with traffic lights, a park, sidewalks and 16 different shops.

According to Rabbi Zalman Grossbaum, executive director of Friendship Circle with his wife, Toba, bringing people with and without special needs together is a key component of the project.

"An important part of the mindset is that we see LifeTown as a means to an end—an incubator for creating true integration," says Grossbaum. "It creates an environment where people experience life with individuals with special needs so they will go out into the world and

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Personal Stories & LifeTown Challenge Thrill Banquet

The applause was thunderous, the standing ovations numerous and the air electric with anticipation as 900 people gathered to honor four couples for their dedication to children with special needs at the Friendship Circle Annual Banquet.

Friendship Circle participant turned volunteer, 13-year-old Sam Prince, opened the evening—and stole the show—by relating his own personal story as a heart recipient and how important FC is to him.

"I am so thankful for the priceless gift of life given to me, but when you think about it, shouldn't we all be thankful for the priceless gifts of life, of love, of family, of community?" Sam asked the audience. "That's what tonight is all about! It's about giving back. It's

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With Humor, Heart And Happiness, Friendship Circle Salutes Its Volunteers

It had the air of a camp reunion or, perhaps, a family reunion, as 300 teens, parents and community members attended the annual Friendship Circle Volunteer Celebration.

The highlight of the evening was the presentation of the Jerry Waldor Fellowship Award to 164 teens who had dedicated a certain number of hours over the past year to enrich the life of a child or teen with special needs. Waldor was an ardent supporter of Friendship Circle and believed strongly in helping the Jewish community.

“Jerry is smiling down at all of you who continue his legacy and continue to impact the world in a positive way” by volunteering at Friendship Circle, Waldor’s wife, Rita Waldor, told the teens during the award presentation.

In addition to the Waldor Award, 16 teens received the President’s Volunteer Service Award. The award, which includes a letter from President Barack Obama and a medallion, recognizes volunteers who log a significant number of volunteer hours.

The event included a buffet dinner, raffles and prizes for the volunteers, in addition to a performance by stand-up comedian Benji Lovitt of Israel.

Jessica Lewinter, 17, has been volunteering at Friendship



Circle for six years and was among those who received a Waldor Award. “It means a lot to be recognized, but coming to Friendship Circle and putting a smile on the kids’ faces means more,” she said. “When I see how happy I made the kids, it feels very good and very fulfilling.”

For Marjie Lagstein and her sister, Louise Berliner, the evening was not only about supporting the volunteers, but cheering on family. Both women came to support their grandsons—Jakob Tannenbaum and Jesse Koppel, respectively—both of whom were FC volunteers this year. “This event is terrific!” said Berliner. “Plus, it’s great that my sister and I, and our families, live in different communities, yet this is a cause that we can both support.”

According to Friendship Circle Director of Operations Levi Grossbaum, more than 950 volunteers, representing 78 schools throughout the region, provided more than 43,000 hours of volunteering this year alone.

“If our volunteers are at the heart of what we do, then their parents are the backbone, thanks to their support and encouragement,” said Grossbaum. “We salute the efforts our volunteers and their families have made to ensure that every child knows the joy of friendship.” ☺

PARENTS BARBECUE

Annual Night Out Encourages Bonds of Friendship



FC Volunteers Find Opportunities for Growth in Israel

As a high school student, Aaron Massoth spent every Sunday morning hanging out with his buddy Alex, a Friendship Circle participant. The two would eagerly await their Sunday mornings together and the bond that grew between them. But as much as Aaron enjoyed spending time with Alex, he didn't think he would be able to continue volunteering after high school, especially as he was heading off to Israel to study for a year before moving on to college.

Immersed in studying Jewish subjects, texts and law at his school in Jerusalem, Yeshivat Lev HaTorah, Aaron realized that he was missing something important—the chance form a friendship with a child with special needs.

“No matter what kind of plans I had for my weekends, I had always made it a priority to be at Friendship Circle volunteering every Sunday morning. Each week when I hung out with Alex, he would run over to give me a huge hug, and he acted like he hadn't seen me in years. Over time, I realized what an impact I had on him just by volunteering with him for a couple of hours a week,” said Aaron. “So when I got to Israel, it felt strange for me to not be able to volunteer.”

Aaron was not alone in wanting to volunteer for FC Israel. Friend and classmate Jacob Schwartz, who had volunteered for FC in Phoenix, was also eager to continue befriending children with special needs.

Then the duo found out about Friendship Circle in Jerusalem and got paired up with brothers, Yakov and Eli, both of whom have special needs.

Aaron and Jacob made an impression on the boys and on Chani Canterman, the

director of FC Jerusalem. “I cannot tell you how good it was to have volunteers who knew exactly what they were doing from the get-go, having received such good training previously,” she said.

“You could sense the FC ethos was in their bones. They felt that they were simply continuing many miles away from home what was natural to them: to be dedicated FC volunteers,” Canterman continued. “And dedicated they were! Week in and week out, Aaron and Jacob turned up at their friends' home, and gave them experiences of fun and camaraderie they will remember for years to come.”

But scheduling those weekly visits initially proved to be a challenge until one of the school's rabbis heard what Aaron and Jacob were doing and gave them permission to miss a learning session once a week.

Rabbi Ely Allen, a former director of Hillel of Northern New Jersey and resident of Bergen County, had been involved with FC Bergen County until he and his family moved last year to Israel. He knew just how important Aaron's volunteering was to local families.

“Although we miss students when they miss class, the ultimate purpose of Torah study is action. Therefore, when Aaron and others have the unique opportunity to volunteer, we really want to facilitate this for them,” said Rabbi Allen.

The dedication that Aaron and Jacob have shown, along with a great need in Israel for FC programs, have inspired Yeshivat Lev HaTorah to find ways for more students to participate in the Friends@Home program in Jerusalem.

This is a unique program that allows students who were involved in the United States to continue their important work,” explained Rabbi Allen. “The ultimate



“When I got to Israel, it felt strange for me to not be able to volunteer.”

goal and expression of Torah study is action, particularly in the area of *Gemilut Chassadim*. It is our great privilege to be involved in this wonderful program!”

FCNJ Executive Director Toba Grossbaum isn't surprised that Aaron found a way to continue being a friend to a child with special needs. As she said, one of the most beautiful aspects of Friendship Circle is that what teens learn during their time with FC stays with them as they go through life.

“Volunteering and being a friend isn't about a specific place or time. It's something that sticks with our alumni as they go out and pursue their post-high school education, enter the work force and beyond,” she explained. “The ability to bring joy to another person—to befriend someone who could use a little cheer—is what Friendship Circle is all about.”



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create inclusive environments.”

The families involved with Friendship Circle are looking forward to the and the many opportunities LifeTown will provide for their children and the community at large. Hal and Susan Sass have two children: a 17-year-old daughter with special needs who has been involved with Friendship Circle since the age of 3; and an 11-year-old son who also participates in various programs.

“My daughter has practically grown up there,” says Hal Sass. “It’s exciting to imagine what LifeTown will be like when it’s done. You know it’s going to be first-rate.”



Everything Has Come Together

The facility will cost about \$14.5 million and should take approximately one year to complete.

Rabbi Grossbaum says there has been “tremendous energy” about the project throughout the community. Connections have been made with local companies that are planning to have employee volunteer days there. Area schools such as The Children’s Institute—for children, adolescents and young adults with autism and related disabilities—will use the building on a regular basis, and local institutions of higher education have been discussing ways to incorporate LifeTown internships into their curriculum. It is estimated that LifeTown will utilize more than 2,300 volunteers—1,500 teens and 800 adults—and serve at least 35,000 participants each year.

Dr. Bruce Ettinger, executive director and superintendent of The Children’s Institute just across the street from LifeTown, has been involved with the project since its inception, providing input on how the new LifeTown

facility can best serve the requirements of his students and others in the community.

“It’s an exciting dream that needed to become a reality,” says Ettinger. “With a bowling alley, theater and the opportunity to practice actual daily-life skills, LifeTown will expand and enrich our programming. It’s also a wonderful way for the volunteers to become more sensitive to people with special needs.”

The need for such a facility is especially pressing here as New Jersey claims the highest rate of autism in the country. The largest population is in Essex County, which Grossbaum describes as “the epicenter of the special-needs world.” Approximately 10,000 children and more than 54,000 adults with special needs reside in Essex County, while the four-county region encompassing Passaic, Union, Essex and Morris counties has more than 19,000 children and 109,000 adults with disabilities.

Some of the major donors for the project include Seryl and Charles Kushner, and Paula and Jerry Gottesman. The indoor park was funded by a \$500,000 grant from the HealthCare Foundation of New Jersey.

There have also been numerous contributions from individuals and businesses throughout the community. More than 1,500 individual donors have helped make LifeTown a reality.

A Model of Inclusivity

Many of the contributors were honored during the groundbreaking.

Addressing the crowd at the groundbreaking, Paula Gottesman said that four years ago, she and her husband had never even heard of LifeTown. But after learning about it from the Kushners, she stated that “our lives haven’t been the same since. ... It’s a project we are honored to be a part of.”

Ann Leeb, whose 9-year-old daughter Mora has special needs, spoke on behalf of not only her own family, but all Friendship Circle families. Noting that the word “inclusive” has in it two very basic words: “in” and “us,” Leeb said: “It is in us, in all of us, to work together to make LifeTown a model of inclusivity for all the world to see and aspire to.”



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about giving with your heart. Giving of your time, your energy—and yes, your money—so that children with special needs can know that they are never excluded and they are never alone.”

He also made an impassioned pitch for the construction of LifeTown. “My dream is to see LifeTown finally be built,” he said, “so that all of the kids and teens can have even more opportunities, more magical moments, more lasting memories.”

It was a theme that was repeated throughout the evening. And when FC Executive Director Rabbi Zalman Grossbaum announced that a groundbreaking date for LifeTown was set, the audience literally leapt to its feet in cheers.

That wasn’t the evening’s only big surprise. Grossbaum also announced a \$2 million matching gift campaign thanks to the generosity of some LifeTown supporters. Grossbaum explained that if Friendship Circle raised \$1 million by the day of the groundbreaking, the donors would match the pledges dollar for dollar. (The Match-a-Thon challenge proved such a success that even more money was raised than anticipated. See page 5 for details.)

That a groundbreaking date had been set was an announcement that Heidi Rome, the mother of two and a Friendship Circle parent, was praying for.

“When Zalman started to speak, I was so excited and so relieved, happy, delighted and thrilled. It’s all good,” she said, holding back tears of joy. “It’s the manifestation of an

idea—the idea of inclusion. That your child can be with the community doing things that are so transparent to other people, but are a triumph to us.”

For honorees Nancy and David Rosenfield, the evening was especially meaningful as the 10th anniversary of the passing of their daughter, Allie, had taken place the day before. The Rosenfields and their children, Lauren and Daniel, along with Nancy’s mom, Sheila Appel, are all dedicated FC volunteers.

“We were blessed with Allie for only eight years, but they were eight wonderful years,” said David Rosenfield. “Friendship Circle was always there to help us with Allie.”

The Rosenfields shared stories about their daughter, and said how much it meant to them that 10 years ago, the Friendship Circle summer and winter camps had been renamed in her memory.

For first-time attendee James Sozomenou the evening was simply amazing.

“It was unbelievable. The stories the speakers were telling are so true and genuine, it almost makes you question how you cannot be involved,” he said.

But it was the dreams of what LifeTown will accomplish that really caught the fancy of both speakers and attendees.

Robert Chefitz, who along with his wife, Laurie, were among the night’s other honorees, noted that LifeTown will be a “center of excellence” whose educational and





technological advances will impact a larger community.

“I am sure you are all familiar with the core business strategy: act local and think global,” he said, “Nothing can be more local than a one-on-one program of kids. What might not be quite as obvious is the global impact. The Friendship Circle and LifeTown are true centers of excellence.

“Already, universities, colleges, medical schools and healthcare systems understand what is going on here and want to participate,” Chefitz continued. “The knowledge and experience of those of you who come through [LifeTown] will carry far beyond these four walls.”

Also honored during the program were Aviva and Mickey Gottlieb, and Gerald and Elizabeth Cohen, along with their parents, Dr. Herb and Marian Cohen. The elder Cohens were honored with a special “Champions of LifeTown Award” in recognition of Dr. Cohen’s decades of work in identifying developmental delays and disabilities in children, and providing services and therapy programs for those youngsters.

In presenting the award, Rabbi Grossbaum noted that the couple is among a group of “trailblazers and giants,” upon whose shoulders LifeTown is being built.

A video recap from the recent Friendship Circle and Camp HASC joint Shabbaton—in which 50 kids from both organizations came together for an overnight Shabbat program—added a bit of amusement to the evening,

especially due to the breezy and comedic style of the video’s host, Meir Kalmenson.

It also offered people a sense of what other kinds of programs, such as overnight respite care, will be possible once LifeTown is completed.

There was also a salute to those who ran the Miami Marathon in January on behalf of Friendship Circle, including Alayne Guberman, who spoke about her personal journey. Guberman had lost her son, Joshua, and her husband, Ira, last year, and when she heard about the marathon and realized that it would fall on the anniversary of her son’s passing, she knew she had to participate.

Running in the marathon, she said, helped her understand that “I could take control of my life. After all, if I could run a marathon, I could do almost anything.”

For Michael Peters and his wife, Erin, who had not previously heard of Friendship Circle and were invited to the program by colleagues, the night was eye-opening. They discovered what a “wonderful and dedicated program it was for both the people who assist and the children who are involved,” said Michael Peters. “Particularly, the personal stories really resonated with me, being a parent of a young child. It was truly inspiring to see the dedication that the parents and people have to lending their support to the Friendship Circle and making it a successful program.” ☺



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