Small temple acts big in Bend

BY DEBORAH MOON
Jewish Review

During its short two-year existence, Bend’s 62-family Reform congregation has used social action to make its mark in central Oregon.

“Members come to me with needs they see,” said Temple Beth Tikvah Social Action Chair Rebecca Gundzik. “I try to make it important for people to do something they feel passionate about.”

Temple Beth Tikvah began with a group of about 18 interested parents in May 2008. Rabbi Alan Berg has traveled from Portland one weekend a month to help launch the congregation, which expects to have a full-time rabbi soon. Late in 2009, the nascent temple affiliated with the Union for Reform Judaism.

Its track toward social action was launched at its first official event—High Holiday Services in 2008, when Berg asked Gundzik to speak on the concept of tikkan olam and making the world a better place. Noting social action is an important goal of the Reform movement, Gundzik said the congregation responded enthusiastically.

“We have made it known in the community of Bend that we care and we want to help out,” said Gundzik. “We’ve done it in a number of ways.”

Temple Beth Tikvah regularly serves dinners at a homeless shelter, has participated in building projects with Habitat for Humanity, hosted presentations on global warming and Oregon’s Death with Dignity law, created a fund to help needy families with babies in intensive care and is on track to be the top fundraising team for the second time in Relay for Life. Most of the projects have arisen from personal interests of congregants including a cancer survivor, ICU nurse, widow of man who used the assisted suicide law and a former homeless shelter board member.

TBT President Lisa Uri praised Gundzik for making it interesting and easy for congregants to get involved.

“Rebecca has done a phenomenal job investigating things we should be involved in and then getting people interested,” said Uri. “She gets people interested and gets them to recognize the importance of it (each issue) and she makes it fun. She gets kids involved.”

See TBT, page 10

Neveh Shalom taps Cantor Bletstein

Congregation Neveh Shalom has selected Cantor Deb- orah Bletstein as its new cantor. The Conservative congre- gation chose Bletstein for the position after a nationwide search for someone who could infuse the synagogue with new ideas and people.

“We are thrilled to have Cantor Bletstein join our com- munity and our clergy,” said Neveh Shalom President Doug Lenhoff. “Her canto- ral training from the Jewish Theological Seminary, expe- rience on the pulpit, and her background in musical theater are a great combination for our synagogue. She will be a real asset to our shul and to the Portland community.”

The hiring of Bletstein follows a yearlong process, dur- ing which members of the synagogue assessed their needs and desires for future musical and cantorial leadership. The Cantor Search Committee reviewed 34 candidates from around the country, including cantors, cantorial solo-rists and a rabbi. The congregation hosted four candidates for Shabbat weekends as part of the search.

“We had an outstanding pool of candidates, but Cantor Bletstein really stood out,” said Search Committee Chair Richard Meyer. “She really impressed us with her ability to use music from across the spectrum and to get people to participate. After Shabbat services with her, many of our members commented that they could not remember a time when the shul was filled with so much spirit and energy.”

Bletstein comes to Portland from Tifereth Israel Syna- gogue in Des Moines, Iowa, where she has been cantor since 2007. She will start her work with Neveh Shalom this summer.

Youth Initiative wraps up year with social action

PJYI board looks to expand service projects in 2nd year

BY DEBORAH MOON
Jewish Review

The Portland Jewish Youth Initiative wrapped up a suc- cessful first year with a community-wide education pro- gram and participation in a nationwide day of service.

“They felt the year was a success,” said PJYI Program Director Jonathan Emmanuel after the council met for a wrap-up session May 16. “They want to plan more direct service projects next year. They felt empowered to make a change and they want to bring in their peers. They want to create teen-led social action campaigns with teens from all over Portland.”

Under the auspices of the Oregon Board of Rabbis with funding from an Innovation Impact Grant from the Jew- ish Federation of Greater Portland, PJYI began this school year as a council of 12 teens from a variety of synagogues and youth groups who plan community-wide programs and social action opportunities for all teens in the com- munity.

PJYI planned workshops for an April 14 community high school program at Congregation Beth Israel that brought together teens and educators from across Port- land. PJYI members led sessions for teens about the en- vironment, economic justice and education. While teens learned about how to address various issues through social action, adults attended a workshop with the Yuval Ron
TBT: Social action big part of new congregation

“It feels different doing social action as a family and a community,” said Uri. “And I know we are making a difference in the community.”

Gundzik estimates a third of the congregation has been very active in social action with another third participating in at least one event. Last year’s Relay for Life team sold more than 50 members ranging in age from 3 to 91. As in many of the congregation’s projects, a member with a personal interest united the interest of other congregants.

When cancer survivor Lauren Olander moved to Bend shortly after Beth Tikvah formed, she soon met other cancer survivors in the congregation and was surprised to learn they had formed the American Cancer Society’s Relay for Life (see box). So when Berg asked her to speak at a Havdallah service at the home of then-TBT President Tory Reynolds, she explained how the 24-hour relay not only raised funds for cancer research but also helped survivors see they are not alone. Afterwards, Berg asked the 30-some people at the service to introduce themselves.

“The first person gave their name and said, ‘I am a cancer survivor,’” said Olander, noticing that everyone else in the room then introduced themselves and added “I am a cancer survivor, or I lost … my husband, … my wife, … my mother, … my friend to cancer.”

“Of the approximately 30 people in the room, every single person had a direct connection to cancer,” said Olander. “How could we not participate? It was the defining moment that gave our team a lot of power.”

Team Heal the World (the translation of tikkun olam) raised nearly $10,000 and were the top fundraising team at the Central Oregon Relay for Life. Olander raised about $4,000 from family and friends in California and another woman who had just begun cancer treatment raised more than $2,000 in just a couple weeks. The team had several members on the track for every hour of the 24-hour relay despite a torrential downpour, said Olander.

“This year, the team has fielded at least 10 cancer survivors, including the oldest survivor in the entire relay, Cel Heermann, age 91 and a 42-year survivor of cancer. Heermann was on the track at last year’s Relay for Life by fellow Temple Beth Tikvah member and cancer survivor Lawrence Schechter, left.”

RABBI ALAN BERG spoke at May 16 standing room only presentation about Oregon’s Death With Dignity law.

40 members and 26 days before the 24-hour relay walk, team members are again in the lead as the top fund-raising team with $5,693.30.

One congregant who is a nurse in the newborn ICU told Gundzik that many families have a hard time paying for gasoline to visit their newborn or paying for food, which causes many families to forego the best possible care. So TBT has launched a fund to buy gas and food vouchers, which will be distributed to patients or their families to receive the best possible care.

Another TBT member brought her personal interest to the congregation resulting in a very well attended presentation on Oregon’s Death With Dignity law. A standing-room-only crowd of more than 60 people attended a May 16 program featuring Berg, a Unitarian minister, a physician speaking on palliative (comfort) medicine and a case worker with Compassion and Choices.

The program was organized by Harriet Shlom Richard, whose husband made use of the assisted suicide law six years ago after battling sarcoma. Richard is now one of two case workers in central Oregon with Compassion and Choices, which provides emotional, social and spiritual support to terminally ill Oregonians.

“I’ve been involved since my own husband used the law,” said Richard, adding “it’s a satisfying experience.”

Richard, who sits on TBT’s social action committee, said that she brought the idea to the committee in part because she has been so impressed with the congregation’s support of social action.

“We do an enormous amount of stuff for a congregation our size,” said Richard. “It’s overwhelmingly wonderful.”

Funding projects that interest members is a key to that success.

Gundzik said she relies on members to bring issues to her attention. And the committee is currently surveying the congregation about what projects and issues they want to pursue.

A former board member of the Bethlehem Inn, central Oregon’s only non-de-nominational homeless shelter, Gundzik has worked hard to raise temple members’ awareness of homelessness in the area. As a result of her efforts, every four to six weeks, congregants prepare dinner for the approximately 70 people at the shelter. Last year a High Holiday appeal raised more than $1,600 for the shelter. And members volunteered to be on call during Christmas week to staff the overflow shelter if severe weather caused an overflow of the main shelter.

“I would love to do everything, but we are a small group,” said Gundzik. “We want to focus on members’ concerns.”