

The Art and Culture of the Orthodox Way

By Victoria Lassonde

Most Ocean County residents are aware that Lakewood is home to one of the nation's largest Orthodox Jewish Communities (second only to Brooklyn in size); but many may not fully understand how the Community functions and what role it plays in the context of the county's future.

According to a representative* of the Orthodox Community, Orthodox Jews currently account for roughly half of Lakewood Township's total population, which looks likely to be about 100,000 in

the 2010 census. The Community comprises about 10,000 families, and the average family is traditionally large, having five to seven children.

Attracted to its beauty and affordability, about 1,000 new families move to Lakewood each year, reflecting an annual growth rate of 7 to 10 percent, the representative said, and officials are fully expecting the Community to continue to grow. "People like to come here," he said.

Elsewhere, the real estate market may continue to flounder in the wake of the economic downturn, but in Lakewood, "there's no housing problem here," according to Rabbi Simcha Greenwald, dean of Congregation Chavrei Hakollel. "We can't build houses fast enough," he added.

The Orthodox Community functions much like any large ethnic group or religious entity in any large municipality, and as such it has unique needs, according to State Sen. Robert Singer, Lakewood Township Committeeman and former mayor. But because it is largely self-contained and self-sufficient, he continued, the Community demands very little from government and is not at all a drain on resources. There seems to be this "terrible misconception" that Orthodox Jews don't pay taxes, which is "absolutely absurd," he said. As a bona fide religious institution, they are allowed to have a tax-exempt parsonage, yes, but the rest of the Community-owned properties are fully taxed, he said. "(The Community) absolutely pays their fair share of taxes."

Overall, he added, the majority of the Orthodox Community is not wealthy, but they are very generous and sharing people. "Volunteerism is huge in that community."

As is the case whenever growth happens rapidly, growing pains are expected, Singer said. Technology has affected them like it has affected just about everyone in modern society, he said, and they deal with many of the same stresses of modern living that everyone else does.

But perhaps the most telling and hopeful sign of the Community's growth and not



Teen Center of Ocean County

Photo Credit: Kim Flesicher

Continued on page 18

prosperity may be found in its young people. In fact the Lakewood Community is not only the second largest but also the second youngest, after New York.

The Community celebrates about 4,000 new births per year, according to Greenwald, and enrolls more than 16,000 students in the private school system, compared to an enrollment of about 5,300 in Lakewood's public school system, according to Singer. Approximately 6,000 to 6,500 students attend Lakewood's yeshiva, or university for advanced study of Jewish texts, which plays a central role in the Orthodox way of life.

The rest of the Community seems to shape itself around the schools, Singer observed. The community will indeed continue to grow, he said – in a planned way, not in a haphazard way.

Education, family, art, culture, history and recreation are all tightly tied together in the Orthodox way of life – a Torah-devoted life – each day lived in strict observance of the laws that govern Orthodox Judaism.

Congregation Chavrei Hakollel's Teen Center for Education and Opportunity, created in 2002, in many ways is a creative channel in the culturally rich fabric of the Community, one that serves the individual, spiritual and communal needs of its members.

For certain, it is a facility where the many different facets of Orthodox life are synthesized and where young people, ages 14 to mid-20s, can discover and nurture their natural talents as well as cultivate their budding identities. At the center, "they get a chance to open up and see who they are," Greenwald said.

"My theory is, God doesn't create losers," said Rob Betesh, the center's director of development and programming. Everyone has gifts, he continued, and the center's goal is to zero in on those gifts and build the kids up in those areas.

The Congregation describes the facility as "an all-encompassing venue for study, socializing, recreation, exercise, one-on-one mentoring, and quiet contemplation. It will be in use throughout the day and well into the night by a wide spectrum of students and members of the community."

The Teen Center has a membership of more than 500 kids but sees 75 to 80 on a regular, weekly basis. "For many, it's transitional; for some, it becomes their home," Greenwald said.

"Long-term support is the only way to succeed with these guys," Betesh agreed.

For many of the kids, an important part of that long-term support is music education and programming – namely World-Class Live Music, the goal of which is to is "to create some real quality cultural events," Betesh said. With county and state funding as well as local business sponsorships, Betesh schedules unique professional Jewish acts to perform free, intimate, public concerts that entertain and inspire audiences. In the spring, the center welcomed the Andy Statman Trio, led by renowned mandolin and clarinet player Andy Statman; The Piamenta Band, featuring electric guitarist Yossi Piamenta (a.k.a. "the Hasidic Hendrix"); and the eclectic and rhythmic blues-y rock band Soulfarm.

Musicians are free thinkers, he said, and free thinkers for the most part don't thrive within the confines of mainstream institutions. At its heart, the center is a place for kids who haven't worked out well in a traditional classroom setting, Greenwald explained.

The center strives to provide Lakewood's Orthodox youth with skills and training in a way that's relevant. Greenwald said the center is interested in working out a partnership with the Ocean County Vocational-Technical Schools to bring vocational training to the area. "Lakewood is underserved in this regard," he said.

While of course many Orthodox Jews engage in widely recognized forms of

self-expression, such as fine art and music, Betesh suggested the truest way in which they express themselves is through the choices they make; the level of education they pursue; the way they uphold traditional family structures.

Earlier this year, Greenwald and Betesh provided a tour of the Teen Center, housed inside a brand new 22,000-square-foot building on Somerset Avenue in Lakewood, designed by Brooklyn-based architect Allen Moses.

"It's quite impressive," Greenwald said. "(Moses) built a world-class building for world-class kids."

Each of the building's three levels are sectioned off into areas that function independently of one another. "Wherever you are, you don't know the rest of the building exists," Greenwald said. At the same time, each part was conceived as an integral part of the whole; "a perfect reflection of the function it serves." As a result, study halls and libraries, classrooms and conference rooms, a gymnasium, a computer lab, a music studio, kitchen and dining facilities, administrative offices and coexist in perfect harmony.

With huge glass panels that allow natural light to flood in, and abutting forested land, the building was designed to foster quiet tranquility, both indoors and out.

The basement is a musician's dream, complete with a soundproofed studio and control room and a vintage 1930s Knabe concert baby grand piano. Betesh, himself a student of sound engineering and a formally trained strings player (primarily bass), speaks of these particular amenities with a gleam in his eye. The basement also has ping-pong and other games. "It's an outlet" for the kids, Betesh said.

The icing on the cake, from Betesh's perspective, is the state-of-the-art media arts technology. "Digital technology makes it easier than ever to train musicians," he said.

"These kids have got real talent," he said later. The center simply gives them the tools they need to turn their talent into a gift to share with the rest of the Community.

"The formula has always been to challenge them and give them the opportunity to proceed," he said.

Everything that goes on at the center is free-form, because "that's the only way things work," Greenwald said. "Everything ... is done as an interactive-type thing." The classrooms, for example, have conference tables instead of individual desks, the better to facilitate group discussion among the center's members and its staff, referred to not as teachers but as mentors or tutors. The center takes "a whole-life approach to the education and development of these talented young men, concerning itself with the *ruchnius* (spiritual matters) and *gashmius* (material matters), both before and after marriage."

Another kind of service offered throughout the center is support groups, to help in areas such as strengthening parenting skills and crisis intervention and diffusion.

"If you want them involved, start asking questions," Greenwald said. "When was the last time someone cared about their opinion?"

Of how the center gains members, Betesh said, "we attract them."

"If someone walks in the door, it's because they want to be here," Greenwald said.

In that way every individual becomes an artist, by taking hold of the instruments he will use to sculpt, paint, write or perform his unique "big picture."

**The unnamed representative is an Orthodox rabbi who requested not to be identified.*