

South Bay teens building rapport with special needs children

by dan pine
staff writer

Nine-year-old Jonah Ginsky waits by the window of his San Jose home, on the lookout for Eyal Matalon and Gabe Hendel, the two teenagers who visit him every week. They should arrive any minute.

Today, they may go to the park to shoot hoops or kick around the soccer ball. Maybe they'll stay in and do homework.

Whatever they do, Jonah will love the time they spend together. Eyal and Gabe are his best buds.

A special needs child with mild autism and retardation, Jonah is part of Friendship Circle, a Peninsula-based community program run by the local Chabad.

Friendship Circle pairs South Bay Jewish teen volunteers with local Jewish children coping with physical, mental or emotional disabilities. Some are in wheelchairs. One kid is blind. All are Jewish and all are welcome into the Circle.

Organizers also host a monthly get-together at Congregation Kol Emeth in Palo Alto where kids enjoy Jewish enrichment, including lessons on Shabbat, the holidays and other aspects of Jewish life.

It's all the brainchild of Nechama Levin, a young woman with a level of poise and maturity beyond her 21 years. "There was nothing in the community for special needs kids," she says of the genesis of the project. "The Catholics have a program. I wondered why there wasn't something for the Jewish community."

Active with B'nai B'rith Youth Organization, Matalon, 17, and Hendel, 16, were among the first to volunteer. After some training the two, along with Levin, met the Grinskys. "They offered us a weekly visit from teens committed to this kind of community service," says Steve Grinsky, Jonah's father. "There was no question that [Jonah] could benefit from this."

"When we first got there, [Jonah] didn't make any effort to communicate with us," recalls Matalon. "Over the next few months he started talking, and three months into it, he was excited to see us."

Levin understands her volunteers are kids themselves, which limits the focus of the visits, but not the impact.

"The idea is friendship," she says. "We're not therapists. What these kids need more than anything is a friend."

As the daughter of Chabad of Palo Alto Rabbi Yosef Levin, Nechama Levin grew up with Chabad's dedication to the Jewish community. "The outlook on life is all about helping others," she says. "Everyone is important, no matter what their affiliation. My life's mission has been helping out in any way I can."

Having been a camp counselor as a young teen, Levin developed a love for working with kids. She spent a year in Israel studying psychology and returned determined to make a difference.

Levin learned that Chabad in Detroit had launched its own version of Friendship Circle that had grown to include more than 300 families.

"I called them up and interviewed the staff," she recalls. "I put out a flier describing a new Jewish special needs program and sent it to all the [South Bay] congregations and schools."

Before long she had 30 families signed up. At the same time, teen volunteers from Jewish day schools and synagogue youth groups came aboard. Today Levin manages 70 volunteers.

And while the teens gain valuable experience, the special needs kids benefit most. Says Steve Ginsky, “I’m really glad there was this service available. If it was another denomination I wouldn’t kick them out, but I’m glad there’s a Jewish presence.”

As for the volunteers, they know time spent with the kids is precious and short. A senior at Homestead High School in Cupertino, Matalon is looking ahead to college in the fall. But the younger Hendel will stay with Jonah and train a new volunteer, who will then train his or her replacement a year later when Hendel moves on. It’s self-perpetuating contact.

Says Matalon of his motivation: “This all comes from within, with very little external incentive. It’s something worth doing.”

Friendship Circle has ongoing community programs. Information: Nechama Levin, (650) 424-9800.

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