

No bar mitzvah left behind

More special needs students enjoy full religious life

By Elise Kigner Advocate Staff



Binny Ellenbogen does his homework with his father, Hershel Ellenbogen. Binny, who has Down syndrome, attends Striar Hebrew Academy in Sharon.

When Debbie Ellenbogen's son Binny was three days old, he was having trouble breathing. Reassured by the doctors that he would survive, Ellenbogen wondered about his spiritual life. Binny had Down syndrome; would he be able to participate in a bar mitzvah ceremony?

Binny is now a first grader at Striar Hebrew Academy of Sharon, and his mother no longer worries about his religious future. At the modern Orthodox Jewish day school that his five siblings have also attended, Binny is learning to speak and follow directions in Hebrew.

Binny loves meeting people at shul and kissing the Torah. Last year, he dressed up as a rabbi for Purim. "He can walk the walk to have a bar mitzvah," his mother said. PHOTO BY SNIR GOLAN

Binny is one of 500 students in the Boston area Jewish day schools who have documented special needs, according to Alan Oliff, CJP's director of the Initiative for Day School Excellence. These students make up about 19 percent of the student population, which is similar to the percentage in the public schools, he said.

Only within the last few years could parents like Ellenbogen obtain the services needed for their children to receive a full religious education. Last Sunday, she was able to personally thank a family that has played a key role in supporting Jewish schooling for children with special needs.

Gateways: Access to Jewish Education honored the Ruderman family at a gala at Congregation Mishkan Tefila in Chestnut Hill attended by more than 650 people. Besides donating directly to Gateways, six years ago



Shira and Jay Ruderman with their daughter at the Gateways gala on Sunday.
PHOTO BY SNIR GOLAN

the Rudermans pledged \$10 million to Combined Jewish Philanthropy's Initiative for Day School Excellence, a 10 year commitment which in part funds special needs initiatives, including Gateways.

At Striar, Binny works with several therapists. In addition, two inclusion aides help him in class by making sure he is on the right page and has the right materials.

The aides are supported by a \$14,000 grant from the Congregation Beth Israel of Malden Ruderman Family Endowment Fund. Besides helping Binny, they assist third grader Elan Galler, who has a seizure disorder and cognitive, social and physical delays.

His mother, Julie Galler, said if Gateways did not exist, Elan would not be able to go to the school that his three siblings attended. She also credited the staff and students at Striar for going out of their way to make Elan feel at home.

Last year, Elan's classmates - understanding that his special diet prohibits foods high in starch and sugar - asked how they could make latkes that he could enjoy. The solution: zucchini latkes.

Gateways therapists help Elan with speech and language, occupational therapy and reading.

Elan cannot yet read Hebrew or English, but he speaks some Hebrew, and knows stories in the Torah. When his family visited Israel, he was able to connect places he saw to Biblical accounts.

Julie Galler said she cannot imagine her son attending anyplace other than a Jewish day school. "He loves it, he loves the singing, he loves the davening, he loves it all," she said.

The number of students with special needs in Jewish day schools is increasing, Oliff said, as is the number of students with moderate disabilities. For now, children with severe special needs, like Binny and Elan, receive support on an individual basis; group programs are in the planning stage.

A decade ago, special needs students often could not get into Jewish day schools or would have to leave by third or fourth grade, according to Arlene Remz, Gateways executive director.

Gateways in Newton was formed three years ago, the product of a merger between the Jewish Special Education Collaborative and Etgar L'Noar. The collaborative worked with three schools when it was founded in 1999. Today, Gateways provides therapists and consultants to 11 out of the 14 Jewish day schools in Massachusetts. It also runs a Hebrew school for students with special needs at the Solomon Schechter Day School and has a b'nei mitzvah program at Hebrew College.

Last Sunday's gala marked the first time the Ruderman family had agreed to be feted by any organization. They hope it will inspire others to donate to Gateways.

"We're not into being honored for the sake of being honored. We're doing it as a way to build an organization that is dynamic and groundbreaking," said Jay Ruderman, president of the Ruderman Family Foundation.

When the Rudermans made their commitment to the CJP program six years ago, they didn't have a family connection to special needs. Since then, Jay Ruderman's nephew has been diagnosed with autism. "I think that brought it closer to home," he said.

The Ruderman Family Foundation consists of parents Mort and Marcia Ruderman and their three children and their spouses, including Sharon Shapiro, who sits on the board of Gateways. Mort Ruderman is a co-founder and former president of Medical Information Technology in Westwood.

Diane Saltzberg, head of special education at Striar Hebrew Academy, acknowledged that not all students will be able to learn Hebrew. More important, she said, is that they are in a Jewish environment.

"We may not turn out Hebrew scholars, but we certainly are turning out mindful Jews," she said.