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A Special Kind Of Shabbat



“A Shabbat festive meal experience”: Monthly Friday meal for developmentally disabled in Croton-on-Hudson provides feeling of community.

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The table was set for a particularly festive Shabbat meal, with burgundy tablecloths, delicately decorated Shabbat candlesticks, vases filled with summer roses, and resplendent challahs. By the time Rabbi Helene Ferris said “Shabbat Shalom,” the residents of this spacious, contemporary house set at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac in Ossining, along with their guests, were sharing stories about their various summer experiences.

“We’re about to light the Shabbat candles,” said Rabbi Ferris, who is the retired rabbi emerita from Temple Israel of Northern Westchester in Croton-on-Hudson. “Why do we light lights to remember Shabbat?” she asked the group.

Sharing food, conversation and the Shabbat experience of prayers and songs — nothing extraordinary about a scene that is replicated countless Friday nights in countless homes and communities —except that at this particular Shabbat dinner, half the participants were developmentally disabled adults who are residents of the Bernstein House group home here. And their guests this evening were members of Temple Israel who volunteered through the temple’s Share a Shabbat program to entertain the home’s residents and participate in the meal with them.

“This is not a Shabbat service, but a Shabbat festival meal experience,” said Rabbi Ferris. It was designed to meet the needs of those participating, and the social aspect is critical. “The most important thing is the connection of each of us

to one another.” Besides the candle-lighting, the group sings a short version of Kiddush, recites the motzi blessing over the challah, and concludes with a short version of Birkhat Ha’Mazon, which is usually an opportunity for the group’s members to speak about what they’re thankful for.

The program is part of the Westchester Jewish Community Services Havorah, a 22-year-old program coordinated by Gail Oliver, which brings Shabbat and other holiday celebrations and observances to the developmentally disabled Jewish population in Westchester.

What makes this particular program especially significant is its monthly frequency. While many congregations around the county offer a special holiday program, or occasional Shabbat program for developmentally disabled adults, the “idea that people are coming who care about them, who come month after month,” said Rabbi Ferris, means a great deal to the Bernstein House residents. “People from the congregation come to the Bernstein House once a month,” said Rabbi Ferris. “It’s fairly popular. We have to limit the number of people because it’s a small dining room.”

The regularity of the Shabbat dinners helps the residents remember the songs from visit to visit. After the meal, the entire group went to the backyard deck to share Shabbat songs. The volunteer musicians from Temple Israel of Northern Westchester — members of that synagogue’s Sh’Ma Na Na band — played a niggun, a wordless chasidic melody. They said, “We’re here to celebrate Shabbat, and one of the best ways to celebrate is through song,” and the residents quickly joined in for a lively rendition of “Shabbat Shalom.”

Not everyone in the Bernstein house is Jewish (about six of the nine residents are). On this evening, they were joined by four residents from the Frankel group home in Somers, which is also run by the nonprofit Opengate agency. No matter what their background, all participated with great enthusiasm.

As Debbie Mayo of Opengate said, “It’s so exciting for them. It’s a beautiful thing, the community coming in like that. One staffer said that one of the residents lives for this.”

And as part of the program, residents from the Bernstein House also attend events at Temple Israel.

“They have an open invitation to come to us,” said Donna Bernstein, a Temple Israel member in charge of Share a Shabbat, which is entering its third year. The dinners are so popular among temple volunteers that there’s even a waiting list to help with them; they also attract bar and bat mitzvah students, many of whom participate in some way throughout the year.