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Hanukkah Festival Brings Light to the Hungry

By CYNTHIA WERTHAMER

CROTON-ON-HUDSON, N.Y.

THE teenagers at Temple Israel of Northern Westchester were asked to think of a project that would benefit society. Their response was a way to celebrate Hanukkah while lightening the burden of a struggling local soup kitchen.

Challenged by their teachers, Lori Cohen and Carol Merle-Fishman, the high school class at the Reform temple's religious school initially considered holding a bake sale to raise money for the crisis in Darfur. But then in October, Ms. Cohen read her students an article in The New York Times about a soup kitchen in Peekskill that was running out of money and would be forced to close, after 25 years, without a surge in donations.

The teenagers spent the next two months organizing a Hanukkah festival, which they held last Sunday, with all proceeds going to the soup kitchen. "There are so many organizations that get a lot of publicity, but this is a local issue that a lot of people don't know about," said Stephanie Schwadron, 14, one of the organizers. "It's important to help local causes."

At least 200 people attended the event, which included games like a menorah ring toss and a Hanukkah Tic Tac Toe; a silent auction; and raffles where the prize was pouring water over the head of the cantor, Steven Sher, or the rabbi, Jennifer Jaech.

"We hear a lot about empowering children," Ms. Jaech said. "This shows what can happen when they take a direction and go with it."

At the festival, the Rev. Douglas Leonard, president of the Peekskill Area Pastors Association, which runs the soup kitchen, wandered among the face-painted children, wearing a grin of his own. He said the soup kitchen — which feeds about 60 people a day, five days a week — now had the resources to stay open for the next 11 months, thanks to fund-raising efforts and pledges from a Putnam Valley resident, Mary Altieri (on behalf of her math-consulting company, Sumtchr) and two Islamic centers — the

Hudson Valley Islamic Community Center and the Upper Westchester Muslim Society in Thornwood — to “adopt” the program for one month a year for the next 10 years. “What we need is nine more repeatable sponsors, starting next year,” Mr. Leonard said.

The association has raised about \$34,000 since announcing its troubles in June, Mr. Leonard said. The Hanukkah festival brought in \$4,600 — the class had hoped for \$3,000 — and a previous fund-raiser by older students raised \$1,000, so the temple will donate \$5,600 to the Peekskill soup kitchen, Ms. Merle-Fishman said.

“We are absolutely thrilled,” she said. “The problems in the world are so huge, people feel impotent about making a difference. This is something right in our community, where we can see the difference we make.”