

BEHIND THE SCENES

One Good Deed...

By Sara Yakira Heckelman, Administrator



I wanted to find the right word to describe my reaction: “to fill with sudden and overpowering surprise or wonder” is the dictionary definition for “astonish.”

On the Friday before Thanksgiving, I joined Rabbi Gottlieb, Board of Trustees members Barbara Hammel and Ian Brown, and David Zeff (who has organized this effort for years) at the Curry

Senior Center in the Tenderloin. Along with volunteers from the Jewish Family and Childrens’ Services (JFCS), our mission was to create an Oneg Shabbat and serve a Thanksgiving luncheon to mostly Jewish seniors.

Rabbi, Barbara and I carpooled from BIJ to Turk Street. As we looked for parking (thanks to David’s forewarning, I had a full parking card with which to feed the meter), I could not help but notice the environs: the heart of the Tenderloin. Boarded up storefronts along with liquor and convenience stores. People in distress in doorways, some talking (to themselves? no bluetooths here), some stumbling down the street. Others functioning in a manner one might call “normal,” warmly though shabbily dressed, going on about their business...

We entered the Senior Center and found the lunchroom. Directed by the JFCS people, we set the tables for a festive lunch and waited for our guests to arrive. Rabbi led the room in welcoming of Shabbat – lighting the candles, *Kiddush* and *motzi*. We heard various accents and languages – English, Russian, Yiddish. Some of the guests spoke Hebrew and said the blessings along with Rabbi, some did not. Some did not “look Jewish,” but what does “Jewish” look like? We come in all shapes and sizes, colors, nationalities and ethnic backgrounds.

Half of the volunteers formed an assembly line to fill the plates (turkey, stuffing, veg); the rest served the plates to our guests seated at the tables. Once the room was served, we offered seconds. And we sat and schmoozed with folks, listening to their stories and their bad jokes (and told a few of our own bad jokes). There had been a donation of cupcakes to supplement the dessert; eyes were wide with glee. Whatever food was left, we packaged into zip-lock bags for people to take home. Not a crumb was left.

I cannot tell you how many times I heard the words “thank you.” Two very short simple words, that told volumes about their appreciation for what we were doing and what our guests received.

I’ve been aware of this volunteer opportunity since Elie and I became members of BIJ five years ago. Until last year I was employed elsewhere or “too busy;” last year I was way “too busy” at the BIJ office to participate. This year, I was still “too busy,” but we had very few volunteers and I made the decision that work could wait – this took precedence.

The outcome? I was astonished at just how much this couple of hours out of our lives meant to our guests. Astonished to see the level of joy and appreciation in their faces. And even more astonished at how I felt in the actual doing of the *mitzvah* – a sense of fulfillment, accomplishment, satisfaction. I had done something that meant so much to others, and that felt good — the result of the altruistic act was a reward for me – who knew? At BIJ, we are recreating our *Chevrat Chesed*; participation gives each of us the opportunity to give a little of ourselves and gain much in return – the fulfillment and satisfaction of knowing how much our action means. *Mitzvah goreret mitzvah* – one good deed or kindness leads to another...

As I was looking for the source to cite the above quote (it’s from *Pirkei Avot* 4:2), I came across this entry by Rabbi Eitan Weiner-Kaplow of Shir Hadash Reconstructionist Synagogue in Northbrook, IL in his November 18, 2011 blog, and it seemed to sum it all up:

“...that is the mandate of our Mitzvah Committee here at Shir Hadash. First, it is to perform righteous acts of goodness and lovingkindness in their own right. We want to see that everyone in need, everyone dealing with sickness and loss, receives loving support from our community. Second, it is to encourage the performance of even more mitzvah actions. In essence we want to see that everyone who has received assistance, caring and help, will pay it forward to those who will need care and comfort in the future. This should ultimately become a snowballing of mitzvah activities on behalf of helping each other, repairing the world and fulfilling our Jewish mission...”

With warm wishes for health, fulfillment and astonishment in the coming secular New Year,

Sara Yakira Heckelman