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Yeshiva Elementary School 'pioneers' celebrate *chai* anniversary

By Elyse Cohn

Special to The Chronicle

In September 1989, on the first morning of school, Orthodox families in the Sherman Park neighborhood came outside to watch 64 children walk to Yeshiva Elementary School for the very first time.

"It brought a lump," said Rabbi Michel Twerski recently as he recalled that morning.

His wife, Rebbetzin Feige Twerski, described the families during the school's early beginnings as having a



Rabbi Michel Twerski

"pioneering spirit.... Everyone played a role, everyone made a difference," she said.

"Everyone was acting on faith," added the rabbi.

Indeed, the beginnings of Yeshiva Elementary School, now known as YES, were modest, and the road ahead was long and unknown.

Fast-forward 18 years, and the picture of YES has changed. The Orthodox elementary school boasts more than 200 children from 72 families. The facility itself has also changed and grown.

In this, the school's *chai* anniversary — *chai* meaning "life" in Hebrew, with its Hebrew letters corresponding to the number 18 — the school community is reflecting, remembering and celebrating.

Meeting a need

The decision to create Yeshiva Elementary School was not necessarily an easy one, but it was crucial to the growth of the community, according to Howard Karsh, the school's first administrator.

"If we were going to grow and continue to attract our own children back to the com-

munity, we needed a yeshiva-type education" available for students of elementary school age, Karsh said.

"[Rabbi Michel Twerski] posed a question at a meeting: What kind of community do we want to be — one that will survive or one that can grow and prosper?"

The timing of Congregation Anshe Sfar'd's move to Glendale was fortuitous for the group seeking a site for its new school. They bought that congregation's building and set about filling it with all that was needed to run a school.

"We bought textbooks that were going to be phased out by MPS," Karsh remembered. "A Catholic girls' school on the south side was closing, so we went to the auction and bought luncheon tables, desks, library bookshelves."

"We did the very best we could," added Twerski, which included traveling with his wife all over the country to raise funds and awareness for the new school.

Beth Meister, who was a student at YES during its first two years and now has two children of her own at the school, recalls the somewhat improvised environment in the beginning.

"The first year the room I was in was separated (from another classroom) by a divider." Yet, she remembers fondly "the excitement" of the new school.

In 1993, the school purchased the facility next door to it, Kramer's Kosher Korner. This opened things up slightly, but not enough to accommodate the influx of families, explained YES parent and board officer Judith Eigen.

"We were busting at the



Rebbetzin Feige Twerski

seams.... The classrooms were small, crowded, poorly lit and poorly ventilated," she said.

In 2001, YES underwent a major renovation and expansion. Another property next door was purchased, and a design team built the addition and renovated the existing facility.

The award-winning result includes a central atrium with a "tot lot" play area for the school's youngest students, which, according to board president Aaron Cadle, is a highlight of the school's design.

Eigen is also excited by the school's overhaul. "The school is filled with light, with color, with openness," she said. "The young children playing in the atrium — they sing and their voices carry through the entire school."

Meister, whose son, Dovid, is in first grade and daughter, Esti, is in kindergarten, can't believe the change from her days at YES.

"Now you walk in and say, 'This is a nice school,'" she exclaimed.

For Karsh, the most amazing thing about the addition was that it was fully paid for when it opened.

Parents are enthusiastic not only about the facility but about the learning that takes place at YES. Meister took particular note of additions to the curriculum, including an arts enrichment program, a gifted and talented program, and more field trips than when she was a student.

For Eigen's two children — Shira, grade 7, and Shaindel, in first grade (her oldest is now at the Torah Academy) — YES has them "excited to go to school every single day."



Howard Karsh

"My children are thriving," she said. "They love what they learn. They're voracious readers, they're bright, engaged, good thinkers."

"The school teaches good character traits," Eigen said. "Not speaking hurtfully is a very big component at the school, and I see that in my children. They don't gossip, and they're very careful about choosing their words."

"They're kind, considerate, they welcome the opportunity to do *chesed* for others," she added.

Growth of community

Karsh declares the creation of YES "prophetic," in terms of what the school did for the Orthodox community in Milwaukee's Sherman Park neighborhood.

"In the last 10 years, over 100 new families have joined the community," he said with pride. "Last year alone, 20 new families have come who would have never come if there was not this kind of institutional base within the community."

Karsh marveled at the scope of the community.

"We had 150 sukkahs in our community this past Sukkos. When we started out we had four to six sukkahs," he said. "There's a flavor to this community now, a sense of it being a Jewish community."

He noted that it was also the creation of the kollel, the adult learning center for Orthodox males, alongside YES that enhanced the community's offerings.

Twerski certainly agrees. "Today's young families dedicated to living this kind of life need all of the amenities to help them grow," he said,



Beth Meister

which includes an elementary and secondary yeshiva, a secondary girls' school, a shul and a kollel.

The growth of the Orthodox community has improved the entire neighborhood, Twerski said. "We're one of the few instances in the United States metropolitan landscape where an integrated neighborhood is working," Twerski said.

"People [in the neighborhood] stop us and say to us, 'We're so grateful you're here. You're such a great presence in our midst,'" his wife added.

Many in the school feel that way about the community's spiritual leaders, the Twerskis. YES' board of directors is honoring the rabbi and rebbetzin as part of the institution's anniversary, beginning with the annual tribute dinner, to be held on Sunday, Jan. 14, 2007.

Eigen, who will chair the tribute dinner, looks forward to honoring the Twerskis. "[YES] is their dream come true, their vision in real life," she said.

"Our community is held together by our rabbi and rebbetzin," Eigen added. "They exude warmth and love and caring about everybody. Everyone in the community feels that."

As the school celebrates its past, Cadle is looking forward. "Even though we've become stronger and larger, it should always be that the children feel that the school is there just for them alone."

Elyse Cohn is a former Chronicle staff writer.

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Judith Eigen