

SHALOM CHAVERIM

F·E·G·S Helps Adults with Disabilities Find Independence and Friendship

How to make a friend and how to be a friend are two of the most important life lessons a person can learn. This is especially true for people who are often considered out of society's mainstream," says Amy Posner, a Certified Social Worker who oversees two unique socialization programs created by F·E·G·S Health and Human Services System for adults with learning, developmental, neurological, or psychiatric disabilities.

The programs – Chaverim (*Hebrew for friend*) and Flotilla – now in their sixth year, help participants develop social skills while they explore their own Jewish cultural identities. Jewish adults with disabilities often have unique needs that require special support in order for them to understand their heritage and to participate as full citizens in the Jewish community and society-at-large.

"The activities of the groups help participants improve their independent living skills, address personal problems, and create a social niche that helps them contend with everyday life in New York," says Posner.

Laura Symons, 36, is a charter member of Chaverim who says a friend is "someone you can have a good time with, who understands you, who helps you when you need it, and who makes you feel comfortable." Symons, who was born in Manhattan, attended special schools to help her deal with some speech and language difficulties, and then completed her high school education. She attends an intensive psychiatric recovery program and would someday like to work in an animal shelter. For the past five years, she has lived in an adult residence in Rockaway, Queens, and regularly makes the trip on her own to UJA-Federation of New York headquarters in Manhattan, where Chaverim meets. Symons says she used to spend "a lot of time alone watching television,"



Participants of F·E·G·S Chaverim program enjoy a day together which began with a ride on the Staten Island Ferry.

but that Chaverim has helped her overcome her shyness. Chaverim and Flotilla each meet weekly to conduct discussions, interactive exercises, and social activities. Both programs are supported through UJA-Federation by a grant from the J.E. and Z.B. Butler Foundation.

There are several unique aspects to both programs, according to Ellen Pepperberg Millman, Director of the F·E·G·S/UJA-Federation of New York Community Trust. "First, the groups are formed to reflect participants' strengths and limitations within a similar range, rather than by a specific disability, which would be the conventional approach," says Millman.

"Another vital part of the program is the development and integration of curriculum content and process. The group may choose to discuss a specific topic, but they are also engaged in the process of learning to listen and to express themselves. The groups are dynamic; they learn specific skills, but they also deal with their own underlying emotional issues."

"Most important," says Millman, is that "all of the activities are part of an overall theme that frames the activities within the context of Jewish heritage and principles. It's more than just learning holiday rituals; it's helping participants develop a deeper understanding of what it means to be Jewish in a city like New York."

Participants in both Chaverim and Flotilla are diagnosed with a wide spectrum of learning, developmental, emotional, neurological, and physical disabilities. What they have most in common, says Posner, is "an awareness of the world around them but not always the maturity to deal with it. At the same time, I am frequently surprised by the insight and depth of understanding that members often show."



Laura Symons on her way to join friends at the F·E·G·S Chaverim program, which meets at UJA-Federation of New York.

Chaverim members, who are in their thirties through the fifties and who mainly live on their own, have explored such varied topics as ancestors, Ellis Island, Israel, addictive behaviors, self-esteem, loneliness, isolation, and the difference between being happy and being satisfied. During Passover, members of the group each brought a portion of the traditional seder dinner to share, and they celebrated the holiday together. They've even joined together for Thanksgiving dinner. Many members of Chaverim hold jobs, from library aide to file clerk, from maintenance to selling hot dogs at Giant Stadium. Others volunteer at local nonprofit organizations.

One thing that Symons likes about Chaverim is that the atmosphere is comfortable enough so that "you can bring up any topic and know that it will get a fair hearing."

"Sometimes one person's problem or concern becomes a group project," says Posner, "When one group member was trying to stop smoking, everyone became involved, offering suggestions to that person. When another was trying to lose weight, the group decided to change the refreshments served at their sessions to healthier, low-calorie snacks." From these kinds of activities group members learn how to support one another, another important aspect of friendship.

The Flotilla group, whose members are mostly in their twenties and early thirties and who generally live with parents or in their own apartments, tends to be more social. "Dating and socialization seminars are popular with this group," says Posner. They have discussed and practiced the kinds of questions that are appropriate to ask someone they have just met, so that they will feel more comfortable having conversations with new people. The group also celebrates Jewish holidays, from Chanukah parties to sharing dinner in a sukkah, and holds their own social activities, from bowling to museum visits to dinner at Kosher Delight.

The groups are small, usually between 14 to 22 people. Posner says, "This allows the participants to feel more comfortable and encourages the building of friendly relationships." Membership of the groups changes over time; some participants move out on their own as they gain confidence.

Symons plans to remain in Chaverim. She says it is "comfortable, flexible, and caring," and gives her the opportunity to share her feelings openly with others.

Chaverim and Flotilla reflect the kinds of specialized F·E·G·S programming that serves more than 9,000 people each day – 78,000 individuals and families each year – at some 300 locations throughout metropolitan New York.

For more information about F·E·G·S Chaverim and Flotilla Programs, call Amy Posner at: 212.366.8034 ■

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