

Mitzvot from the heart

our community's bar and bat mitzvah projects



Maddie Edwards-Ray
United Hebrew Congregation

From age five, Maddie knew that she wanted to be a special education teacher. So it was a perfect fit that she chose the Life Skills Foundation for her *mitzvah* project.

Daughter of Laura and Tom Ray, Maddie has always loved helping people, especially children with special needs. She has won several awards for her kindness when it comes to how she'd spend her "recess" time with the kids that are special. The Ray family has several close friends with children that are autistic.

"Maddie would always be with those kids and help them while the other children played. She has always been so empathetic towards these wonderful and special children," said her mother.

Before deciding what exactly she wanted to do for Life Skills, Maddie, a student at Parkway Central Middle School, was already raising money for the organization. She enlisted the help of her younger sister, Morgan, and five neighborhood friends and set up Kool-Aid stands and sold cupcakes and cookies door-to-door.

When Maddie found out about the Life Skills 4th annual walk in April, the "Walk, Run 'n Roll," she wanted to participate in any way she could. "It was a beautiful event," said Laura, as she, Maddie and Morgan were in charge of "greeting" the participants and patrolling the traffic. They walked along the sidelines, encouraging the walkers and runners to keep up the pace and do their best. Many of the entrants were clients of Life Skills. They plan on making this walk an annual Edwards-Ray event.

For more than 44 years, Life Skills has helped people with developmental disabilities live and work with dignity in our community. Today, Life Skills serves more than 1,400 adults and teens each year to live in their own home and apartments, to find and keep a job, and to make friends and access the St. Louis community and all it has to offer. To find out more about Life Skills or make a donation in Maddie's honor, please visit their Web site at: www.lifeskills-stl.org.

Samantha Jespersen
Congregation Shaare Emeth

"What do you mean they don't have a home?" Samantha, daughter of Stacy and Jon Jespersen, asked her mother.

They were just finishing up tutoring one afternoon at Congregation Shaare Emeth, and Stacy explained to her that they were from the homeless shelter and that they were coming to Shaare Emeth for Room at the Inn. "Once a month they come here for a meal and a safe place to sleep."

Samantha was speechless. "Where do they live otherwise? And where do they go to school and where do they play?" All these questions were thrown at Stacy quicker than she could answer. She explained that for one reason or another, these people do not have a home and move from shelter-to-shelter every night.

That was a lot for someone Samantha's age to understand, but what she could understand was that these kids didn't have

a place to have fun. "Mom" she said, "can I come back up here to play with them?" It seemed like a good idea but they thought they should get permission. After speaking to Rabbi Andrea Goldstein, Samantha's *mitzvah* project was underway.

A student at Parkway Northeast Middle School, Samantha has now made a minimum of a six-month commitment to spend time once a month to visit and play with the kids who come to Shaare Emeth for Room at the Inn.

"Not very many kids my age think about what homeless people do, where they sleep, or what they eat. I know that these children are not very much different from me and deserve to have fun just as much as I do. I come and I play games with the children and even sometimes stay later than my shift lasts," Samantha said.

"These children have opened up my heart and made room for themselves. I now think of homeless people as just ordinary people, who don't have a home. I know that help-

ing the homeless is a great *mitzvah* that everyone should do."

"These people sleep on old sheets (slept on by many people), eat food most working class people call school food, and play with old board games. I know that's not something I call a luxury life. I plan on taking some of my *bat mitzvah* money and buying new sheets and/or games to play to the people who stay here," she said. "Room at the Inn has made an impact on my life, an impact that cannot be removed."

Each month Shaare Emeth hosts Room at the Inn, a homeless shelter that moves from congregation to congregation each night. The guests include primarily homeless mothers and their small children who come to the temple the third Wednesday of each month. Volunteers host these guests by making dinner, visiting with the adults and children, and often the volunteers bring their kids to play with the children.

They can always use more volunteers and the "sleepover"



shift is one of the last shifts to fill and yet quite easy to do. Volunteer "sleepers" arrive at 9 p.m., sleep in a separate room from our guests and assist with breakfast and transportation back to the day shelter the following morning.

If you or anyone you know is interested in helping, please contact David Gerst at 636-349-3225 for more information. Please help everyone get a good night's sleep.

Carly Sherman
United Hebrew Congregation

Carly's cousin, Justine Saltzman, was diagnosed with PKD (Polycystic Kidney Disease) when she was two years old. So, it was no wonder that Carly, daughter of Deanna and Mark Sherman, chose this organization for her *mitzvah* project.

A student at Crestview Middle School, Carly started supporting the PKD organization six years ago when she participated in their first walk and has continued ever since. This year she decided to recruit her friends and family to walk and raise money for PKD. She raised close to \$1,000. The next PKD walk will be held on Sunday, Sept. 21, at 10 a.m. at Tower Grove Park.

Raising awareness and



Carly Sherman (at left) and her cousin Justine.

funds for the foundation is an ongoing project for Carly. She would ask her religious school classmates to donate some of their *tzedakah* and

she always promoted PKD at Crestview when the student council was looking for a foundation to support.

PKD is not a well-known

disease but it is the most common life-threatening genetic disease. It is passed from generation to generation, and affects more people than Down Syndrome, cystic fibrosis, muscular dystrophy, and sickle cell anemia combined.

Justine has had to live with high blood pressure and cysts growing on her kidneys. She has a 60 percent chance of kidney failure. That means either a transplant if a donor is a right match or kidney dialysis.

To make a donation in Carly's honor and find out more about PKD, please visit their Web site: www.pkd-cure.org or call 1-800-PKD-CURE.

The Polycystic Kidney Disease foundation applies 80 percent of the money raised toward research and a cure.

Highlight your child's mitzvah project

If you would like to feature your child's *mitzvah* project in the "Mitzvot from the Heart" page, please contact Elise Krug at the *Jewish Light* by calling 314-743-3671 or by email at: ekrug@thejewishlight.com.

