

# Mitzvot from the heart

our community's bar and bat mitzvah projects

## Mark Finkelstein

Congregation Shaare Emeth

Mark really wanted to work in a "soup kitchen". It was difficult finding a place where he could serve food, as many required a minimum age older than 13. Knowing this wasn't going to be easy or fun, he wanted to make a difference in peoples' lives. Son of Judy and Jeff Finkelstein, Mark didn't love going, but he always asked his mother when they could go again. He wanted to continue to spend time there. He understood that this project wasn't about him or about having fun, but about doing something to help others. "I think that my help there has been very much appreciated."

Mark's *mitzvah* project was volunteering at the Gateway Homeless Shelter. A student at Parkway Northeast Middle School, he spent many weekends there. He did everything from serving lunch, to helping kids with math and reading, to playing chess and checkers with kids.

Volunteering his time at Gateway was a real eye opener for Mark. Some of the things he saw were difficult for him to wrap his head around. There is a dorm room with about 100 beds where everyone sleeps. The bathrooms are minimal. There were two toilets and two showers connected to the dorm, but there were other



bathrooms on other floors. All with concrete floors and very little privacy.

The building they are in was not originally built to be a shelter and it is certainly better than the alternative of living on the streets. The shelter does an amazing job of housing, feeding and educating people. Their goal is to get residents jobs and teach them how to live out on their own. They all have chores to do and strict rules to live by. Many people ultimately move out into their own apartment after learning life skills at the shelter.

One of the things that

shocked both Mark and his mother was that almost all residents had cell phones. "How could they have a cell phone if they didn't have anything else?" asked Mark. It was explained to them that a cell phone is their lifeline and their only way of contacting the outside world for a job, a doctor or family member. Mark received a cell phone for his *bar mitzvah* and knows his cell phone is a privilege and luxury and appreciates it that much more now that he has seen people much less fortunate than himself.

"Working at the shelter

really made me understand how lucky I am to have what I have like a solid roof and my own room and bed. Also, to just have a house is so important. So the next time I wish I had something a little better, I will just think about the fact that I have a house and a family, and know that I should be grateful."

Mark also purchased personal care items for the residents at the shelter with some of his *bar mitzvah* money. These items are not covered by food stamps so they are always needed. He donated toothbrushes and toothbrush holders, deodor-

ants, hair and body soap, toothpaste, and laundry detergent.

The Gateway Homeless Shelter is the largest, most comprehensive emergency shelter in Missouri. They reach out to those lacking in hope, those with few choices, to offer a helping hand. Their mission is providing safe, secure, nurturing emergency shelter services that empower homeless people to move into transitional and independent housing.

To find out more about the shelter or to make a donation in Mark's honor, please visit their Web site at: <http://www.gatewayhomeless.org/>.

## Rebecca Cohen

United Hebrew Congregation



Rebecca, daughter of Golda and David Cohen, "knew how hard it was for her ancestors to learn a new language and she didn't want anyone else to live like that." That is why she chose, as her *mitzvah* project, to help a little girl from India with her language and reading skills in the English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program.

"My grandma told me that when her mother came to the

U.S., she was too afraid to speak because she didn't want to say the wrong thing. I don't think anyone should live like that, so I decided to help out in the ESOL program at Craig Elementary, where I also went to elementary school."

"I felt really good, especially when I found out that the one day I missed because I was on a field trip for school, the girl, Ojasvi, was sad that I couldn't come. I felt like I had

really made a difference and that was really cool," said Rebecca, a student at Parkway Northeast Middle School.

Craig Elementary is just one of eight schools in the Parkway School District that offers the ESOL program. This program offers intensive instruction to students whose first language is not English and who have limited English proficiency. Students learn to

understand, speak, read and write English and are helped to adjust to a new culture.

Rebecca said, "anyone can help by volunteering at their schools, or even helping peers in their schools or work and by being nice to them and bringing out their confidence!" For more information about ESOL, please visit their Web site at: [www.pkwy.k12.mo.us/C\\_I/esl/index.cfm](http://www.pkwy.k12.mo.us/C_I/esl/index.cfm).

## 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](mailto:ekrug@thejewishlight.com).

