

Community Support Still Urgently Needed for “Our Place” to Survive

BY HADASSAH LEHRFIELD

The Jewish community has been extremely generous in its support of Our Place over the last few months, and we want to express our heartfelt appreciation to our growing list of supporters. We are only able to continue our work keeping Jewish teenagers safe, off the streets, and in rehab because of your generosity. Mere words cannot express our thanks, and the *zechus* you have earned by joining us in this tremendous *mitzvah* of *hatzalas nefashos* is immeasurable.

Avi Fishof, having assumed the mantle of leadership, is working tirelessly with his staff to raise the funds to sustain this network of teenage drop-in centers.

Avi and his wife Zisi hosted an emergency *melaveh malkah* parlor meeting at their home in Flatbush with hundreds of community activists, lay leaders, Rabbanim, and politicians in attendance.

Another parlor meeting was coordinated by Mr. Moshe Engel and held in the home of Dr. Ari Walfish in Queens, whose caring community was moved to take action when they learned of our plight. Many prominent Rabbanim and *askanim* were also present at that meeting, and the response at both meetings was overwhelming.

Mr. Fishof's fiery speeches at these events and at appeals made in community shuls moved listeners deeply. The appeals culminated in an outpouring of generosity that evoked the response “*Mi k'amcha Yisrael*” — there is no nation like *Am Yisrael*, whose hearts bleed for a fellow Jew in distress. The way so many of you have shown your caring by giving *tzedakah* wholeheartedly in this economically difficult period is truly heartwarming.

The financial status of this community service organization has changed drastically in the last year. Government funding was abruptly cut, and we now find ourselves in the precarious position of having to raise over a million dollars in private funds to account for the shortfall. So far, all our efforts to secure a new government grant under the “member items” statute have fallen on deaf ears. This is a foolhardy strategy because, as the saying goes, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

The teenagers we service who are using and abusing illegal drugs and/or alcohol are in dire need of intervention. For these individuals, Our Place is heaven-sent. It offers hot kosher dinners, fun activities, a group of friends, and empathetic professional staff members, who are available to the many boys for whom Our Place is a second, or in some cases only, home.

Sadly, Our Place and its affiliates may still be unable to remain operational if we cannot meet our budget. There is no doubt about the need for this kind of organization in light of the huge number of kids who are at risk of falling between the cracks. In addition to our boys' drop-in-center, we run Our Place II (for girls), The Living Room for ongoing treatment and meetings for those struggling with addiction, and Yeshiva Simchas Chaim for boys who



Avi Fishof speaking at one of the parlor meetings.

need a more personal approach.

The dedication of our program directors, Chaim Glantz and Sony Perlman, is unparalleled. The way they managed to keep Our Place running as usual in the midst of a blizzard that strangled New York City is just one example of their devotion. They know from first-hand experience that if the boys do not have therapists available to assist them at the right time, it can be disastrous on many levels — but this is what would happen if we are not able to pay their salaries due to the budget shortfall. The boys would be on the streets without help for their addictions, and they would likely exacerbate the problem in our community by introducing other boys to the same disastrous lifestyle.

Aside from the more familiar scenario of teenagers who rebel or who cannot do well in school, the need for a safe haven is a far more serious matter for an entirely different subset of our population. More boys than you can imagine come from homes in which the environment is terrible, where there is abuse or neglect and little chance for them to thrive. They would have nowhere to turn if not for Our Place. The reality of these teenagers' lives is one we would not wish on our worst enemies.

Unfortunately, the transition from troubled teenager to addict can be quicker than you would think. Obtaining and using illegal drugs today is nearly as common and accepted, in certain elements of society, as smoking cigarettes used to be. In the larger American culture it is almost a rite of passage for teens to experiment with drugs. Not so for us; therefore, the danger of misuse and abuse is even greater, and the risk of our teenagers overdosing and dying is a horrifying reality that those who work with them have been forced to face. Anyone who has attended these tragic *levayos* is driven to do his utmost for the cause.

Your donation, in any amount, to Our Place is necessary to save the lives of these precious *neshamos* in *Klal Yisrael*. In the *zechus* of our efforts to rescue these *Yiddishe neshamos* and enable them to reach their potential, may Hashem *bentch* us all with true *nachas* from our children.

Donations can be sent to Our Place, 44 Wall Street, 2nd Floor, New York, N.Y. 10005. *Tizku l'mitzvos*.

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