

Community Rallies Behind 'Our Place'

Noted Askan Reb Avi Fishof at Helm of Leadership

BY AKIVA FIALKOFF

"We buried three Jewish boys this summer," said one of our sponsors.

We all know that the *mitzvah* of saving a life is unparalleled. Thus, it is extremely disturbing to hear that Our Place may have to close its doors after more than a decade of saving Jewish lives. Although Our Place is thankfully still open, it is unable to provide the same level of care to its kids.

Countless children — yes, children, even though they are in their teen years — wander through the unmarked door on Avenue M in Midwood for the love and acceptance they do not receive in their homes, schools or community.

The purpose of this article is not to ascribe blame or to delve into the complex issues of teens who go off the *derech*. Rather, it is to impress upon the community the vital importance of the work that goes on at Our Place.

The Unmarked Door

Our Place operates as a beacon of light in an otherwise shadowy world.

"This space is desperately lacking in our communities, as we are caught up with vanities, seduced by media and worship superficial virtues," said one of the boys.

Looking around at the guarded faces of kids suffering from emotional, physical and substance abuse, one comes to realize the urgency of the situation.

Future Foreboding

It is also a threat to the safety of our community's streets if these doors should close.

One freezing Shabbos night a few weeks ago, three boys broke into a neighborhood shul. They were seeking shelter from the cold and looking for a warm place to sleep. They were also under the influence of alcohol.

The boys were discovered when members of the *vasikin minyan* arrived early the next morning. *Davening* was postponed until the hung-over boys were removed and the shul rearranged.

"I sleep on the trains to stay warm," said a boy who was in yeshivah until three months ago.

"The streets are a difficult place," said Yanky, who inhabits that cold and dark world.

If Our Place really were to close, these scenarios could become even more commonplace.

The Community Steps In

When called for the upcoming alumni dinner, many parents expressed profound gratitude for the help provided by Our Place. "Our Place was an anchor, a place where my son could have fun *b'heter*, and connect with the right people," said one mother.

At first, many of the parents had been astonished to discover where their children were spending their time. Yet, these same parents were receptive and thankful for the help and services their children received. One mother was going through a particularly dark period because her son had chosen to leave home and pursue drugs. Another offered to volunteer! "Our children are waiting to join the countless success stories," she said.

The Goal Is in View

Famed *askan* and noted director Avi Fishof echoed similar ideas in his moving speech this past Shabbos at the Agudah of Avenue L. "Our Place is indeed *our place*; our responsibility; our priority. The Living Room is our living room; *Klal Yisrael's* living room," he asserted in his appeal.

With much *siyatta diShamaya, baruch Hashem*, the goal is in view, though still far off. "The community is taking responsibility and donations are flowing in, though we are still far from our desired goal," Mr. Fishof noted.

Our Place teaches these troubled boys that the essence of Torah starts with *middos*, as we are all familiar with the *mishnah* in *Avos*. "Most people are unaware that there are *shivim panin laTorah*," said an Our Place volunteer and Hatzolah member, Rafi Hassan.

With the wisdom and guidance of *Gedolim, shlita*, such as Harav Shmuel Kamenetsky, the Novominsker Rebbe and Harav Mattisyahu Salomon, as well as local Rabbanim, Our Place's success rate is over seventy percent.

However, danger always lurks around the corner — and it is frightening to envision that the next step is six feet lower. "These shoes were covered in mud as I helped bury another of ours who died this summer," said a donor.

An 'Our Place' for Girls, Too

Following the remarkable successes achieved by Our Place in helping our community's boys, a division for girls was established. Our Place Girls offers hot dinners and has all kinds of activities that are popular with girls. "I realized how much I had changed when I was in a restaurant and observed the inappropriate and frightening behavior of two girls with addiction problems," says one girl.

The Living Room

In a communal room in Our Place that is familiarly called the "Living Room," meetings are held for people recovering from addiction. Here, young people find support and acceptance in a therapeutic environment as they seek emotional and spiritual wellbeing. This past Sunday, eight "anniversaries" were celebrated by people commemorating another year of being "clean and sober" from drugs. It was a most inspiring session as people described the difficult challenges they had undergone.

A young couple who came to support their cousin found the experience overwhelming. "If people only knew about the love and warmth of these meetings and the Living Room, all the necessary funds would be raised."

Yeshivah Simchas Chaim is a high school that caters exclusively to boys who have been refused entry by other yeshivos. Its goal is to provide a yeshivah environment where boys can thrive. It tackles the issues that trouble teens and engages them in learning by making the subject matter interesting, relevant and personal. A team of mental health professionals provides therapy, and the school offers extracurricular activities.

Our Place and its affiliates provide an essential ingredient in building the Jewish *neshamah* of its teen members — unconditional love and acceptance in a healthy environment. The idea is not revolutionary; it is simply overlooked. The greatest good we can do for our children is to love them unconditionally and communicate our love to them regardless of their current situation. The solution is simple, yet its application takes a lifetime.

Just this past week, emergency money had to be raised for two boys who needed to be sent to rehabilitation centers in distant cities. How many second chances does *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* give us? How wonderful it would be if we could channel the energy of our teens into positive outlets!

After being approached by Rabbanim and community leaders, and after visiting Our Place and the Living Room, Reb Fishof said, "I realized the dire urgency of the situation. I immediately decided to answer the clarion call of the *Gedolim*, accepting the challenge of saving hundreds of *Yiddische neshamos*." Mr. Fishof, his staff and communal leaders have banded together to meet with government officials, hoping to reinstating the government grants that were terminated.

Your help is urgently needed as well. "At the end of the day, if Our Place is shut down or allowed to close, the lives of hundreds of children will be affected and shut down as well. Please keep Our Place open for the sake of hundreds of others who are in similar positions. Our Place saves lives," pleads a concerned member.

Contributions can be sent to Our Place, 44 Wall Street, 2nd floor, New York, N.Y. 10005. Avi Fishof can be reached at (212) 742-0707, ext. ension 40 or at a.fishof@ourplaceny.org. For additional information, visit www.ourplaceny.org.