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Community

ORT courts a younger crowd

LOIS GOLDRICH

Fort Lee resident Shirley Weinstock has a special affection for ORT: Her husband, a survivor of Buchenwald, attended an ORT vocational school in Switzerland after the war, where he learned how to become an electrician.

Weinstock, who headed a chapter of Women's American ORT in Jericho, Long Island, and is former regional president of ORT in Manhattan, now leads the Englewood and Cliffs Chapter of the organization. But her 300-member chapter — founded some 46 years ago — is made up of "more mature women," says Weinstock, which is why the group is now specifically working to attract younger members through programming targeted to their interests.

"We're trying to find young people," says Weinstock. "We want to teach them about ORT."

So, the chapter's next program, scheduled for March 26, is particularly appropriate for Women's History Month, which falls in March, and should be of interest to younger women.

Keynote speaker Dr. Amy Neustein is co-author of "From Madness to Mutiny: Why Mothers Are Running from the Family Courts — And What Can Be Done About It," which explores how mothers throughout the country are treated by family courts in cases involving the sexual abuse of children.

"ORT...knows that individuals in search of a promising future need...training and education to foster self-sufficiency," said Weinstock. "Amy Neustein's work helps

to promote that promising future by teaching and training mothers to stand up to family court injustices in their fight to protect their children."

The program has been advertised by word of mouth and through mailings to parents of Hebrew school children.

The problem of attracting young members is very much on the mind of ORT leaders.

Ari Rosner — Women's American ORT member services coordinator, who handles the group's young leadership portfolio — says that while, offhand, she can't cite the average age of an organizational volunteer, most of the members are certainly "older."

She notes that ORT's success in attracting young people varies from region to region. Generally, she says, where the group already has a strong presence, it is more likely to draw in young people.

Rosner says that while ORT is exploring ways to attract younger people, the definition of "young" varies with location. In Atlanta, she says, the young leadership group attracts those in their late 30s, while in Manhattan, the women tend to be in their 20s. In Chicago, the young leadership group is more likely to include people in their 40s.

Not every membership technique works in every locale. In Atlanta, which has been targeted as an area of potential growth, the women prefer a traditional "chapter approach." In Manhattan, new members respond to inclusion in event-planning committees. "Connections" in this age cohort are generally made through



Dr. Amy Neustein

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What is ORT?

ORT — created in Russia in 1880 as Obshestvo Remeslenofo zemledelcheskofo Truda (the Society for Trades and Agricultural Labor) was designed to help lift Russia's 5 million Jews out of crushing poverty. Today, the international group runs a network of schools, colleges, centers, and institutes that reach about 275,000 students all over the world.

Women's American ORT, founded in 1927, calls itself the largest contributor to the worldwide ORT program. According to the group's Website, the organization has maintained its "tradition that hand-outs don't work. Teaching a skill, on the other hand, is a positive step toward improving one's chance for success."

While the skills needed for survival have changed, ORT continues to "provide the skills and knowledge necessary for Jewish communities to cope with the complexities and uncertainties of their environment, to foster economic self-sufficiency, mobility, and a sense of identity through use of state-of-the-art technology." In addition, through its international cooper-

ation program, ORT supports nonsectarian economic and social development in underdeveloped parts of the world, offering both vocational training and technical assistance.

Reviewing a timeline of ORT's achievements reveals a long, proud history. Within 20 years of its founding, the organization had provided manual training to 25,000 Jews in the Russian Empire. During World War I, ORT established cooperative workshops, soup kitchens, and credit offices, which it says saved thousands from starvation, as well as a relief-through-work project for displaced Jews. Forced out of Russia by Stalinist purges in 1938, the group returned in 1990 and now boasts major educational centers there. And not only did ORT conduct training in post-WW II displaced person camps, but it established the first modern vocational education institute in the new state of Israel and has worked actively to absorb the large waves of immigrants to that country from Ethiopia. In addition, a large network of ORT schools exists in Latin America.

word of mouth, says Rosner.

She points out that ORT was traditionally a social organization for its members. Today, "young people have so much going on socially and professionally, and there are so many groups they can join," that attracting them "is a challenge."

Neustein, who will keynote the New Jersey chapter's March program, has become a leading voice in the battered mothers' movement and recently received the Woman of Valor: Lifetime Achievement Award at the Battered Mothers Custody Conference at Siena College. She has been featured in the media numerous times and has written many articles for both scholarly journals and the mass media.

The daughter of a rabbi in Brooklyn, Neustein, a resident of Edgewater, said she wrote "From Madness to Mutiny" "to expose the malfunctioning of the court system," stating that there is a "backlash against mothers who make good faith accusations of abuse."

"It's Kafka-esque," she told the Standard, reporting that a 20-year study of such cases revealed that women are penalized for bringing such cases to the courts.

ORT was traditionally a social organization for its members. Today, young people have so much going on socially and professionally, and there are so many groups they can join, that attracting them is a challenge.

Neustein, who holds a Ph.D. in sociology and is on the faculty of the National Judicial College, said that she became a victim of the system in 1986, when her own daughter was molested by her father, Neustein's ex-husband. When, after reporting the abuse, she lost custody of the child, Neustein brought the case to the attention of the New York Legislature, which held a hearing in her behalf. Despite the existence of third parties who could corroborate her charges of abuse, said Neustein, she was unable to regain custody. When she tried to bring additional evidence of wrongdoing before the courts, she lost permanent visitation rights, she said.

Neustein would tell women who suspect that their children are being abused to get a lawyer, even before bringing in social service agencies. She believes that "case workers may twist your words and accuse you of neglect" if you suggest that you may have seen earlier signs of abuse.

She also insists that mothers be present at all meetings so that their rights cannot be "negotiated away. Everything should be on the record," she said.

Finally, Neustein insists that mothers caught in this situation "should be discouraged from running. Over 90 percent get caught," she said. "You need special skills to survive, and you will lose your support system." Rather, she encourages mothers to "seek out support. Don't be bullied by gag orders," she says, pointing out that what you say in front of a legislative committee can legally be sent to the press.

While Neustein believes that the problem of child abuse exists among all religious groups, she says it is particularly hard to confront in the Orthodox Jewish community because of the "taboo" against discussing issues of sexuality.

"We must clean this up in our own community," she said.

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