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'Just Jew It' makes religion lessons fun

JEWEL program prepares to open a Gaithersburg campus this fall

by Chris Robinson | Staff Writer

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An Olney-based Jewish Sunday School is bringing its distinct education philosophy that blends learning with fun to Gaithersburg this fall.

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JEWEL Hebrew School, which stands for Jewish Education for Life, offers weekly classes for children in kindergarten through grade seven and Bnai Mitzvah training.

With more commitments these days, getting motivated and budgeting time for religious education is a problem that families of all faiths are struggling with, said Executive Director Rabbi Eli Fink.

“People are so busy that the things that I would consider, and I think in the long run that are very important, fall to the wayside,” said Fink, of Olney. “Family time, teaching your kids about choices and about morality and things like that.”

The Gaithersburg campus will offer classes and Bnai Mitzvah training from 10 a.m. to noon on Sundays from September to June.

The school plans to operate in space at Fields Road Elementary School, located at 1 School Drive, pending approval from Montgomery County Public Schools.

Fink expects to serve families in Gaithersburg, Germantown and North Potomac.

A Sept. 9 opening day celebration for the Gaithersburg campus is planned, and will include games similar to Family Double-Dare, food-eating contests and other events tied to Jewish lessons.

Meanwhile, JEWEL also will continue at the Olney campus, located at the Jewish Family Center, 18318 Georgia Ave. That campus serves families from Olney, Rockville and the surrounding area.

Lessons are handled through games, projects, songs and sometimes relay races.

The schools also offer free High Holiday services and family events.

“The whole point is so kids are used to it, instead of this big thing that’s so hard to get,” said the school’s principal, Rani Schlenoff of Germantown. “They don’t realize how easy it is to be Jewish.”

Unlike many Sunday school programs, JEWEL is unaffiliated with a particular synagogue, which encourages more involvement, Fink said.

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It also aims to create a summer camp atmosphere with a focused curriculum, where children get excited about Jewish traditions, he said.

The school's "Just Jew It!" program is highly effective with instilling Jewish traditions in children, Schlenoff said.

Through it, students accumulate points for good behavior, such as cleaning their bedrooms, as well as celebrating Jewish traditions, like helping set the table for Shabbat. Students with enough points earn a trip to Six Flags amusement park.

Carla Yegher of Darnestown said this program inspired her 8-year-old daughter Jaycee, who attended the Olney campus.

"She would look forward to doing the prayers as well as all the other holidays," she said.

Yegher, who plans to transfer her daughter and eventually enroll her 4-year-old son at the Gaithersburg campus, applauded JEWEL for its "fun environment" that presents a positive experience for being Jewish.

"All of it is to just try and encourage people that to get more involved in being more proactive in creating lives that will be meaningful," Fink said.


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JEWEL Hebrew School of Olney is opening a Gaithersburg campus this fall. Call 301-260-0210 or visit www.betterfamily.org.

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