

What does "A Uniquely Special Education" mean?

It means tailoring a unique educational program for each child with special needs – an individualized program that addresses the unique needs of the child and that uncovers and builds upon the unique strengths of the child.

It means maximizing each child's individual potential, nurturing a sense of pride in his or her religious heritage, and helping each child discover opportunities to fulfill his or her dreams.

It means enabling each child to use the gifts given to him or her by the Almighty to become an active, contributing member of our community and society.

It means reaching and enlightening a child who previously has known darkness. In many cases, families turn to us after their children have failed at other mainstream and special education facilities.

It means having an extraordinarily dedicated, talented and devoted team of professionals – caring instructors with extensive training and practical experience, who employ the finest of special education techniques.

And it means growing an educational institution that rises to the financial challenges inherent in having a professional staff-to-student ratio greater than 1:2.

Since 1982, SINAI Schools have been all this and more, providing unparalleled excellence in Jewish education for children and young adults with a broad spectrum of learning and developmental disabilities.

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JewishStandard



Special-needs school to honor its longtime dean



JEWISH LIFE

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Reflections on a 'special' school

Sinai to honor founding director Laurette Rothwachs



Sinai Schools Dean Laurette Rothwachs walks in a hallway at the Rosenbaum Yeshiva of North Jersey with her son, Rabbi Dr. Yisrael Rothwachs, who will succeed her in September. COURTESY SINAI SCHOOLS

LOIS GOLDRICH

In the early 1980s, three Orthodox Jewish families in Fair Lawn faced a stark choice: to send their special-needs children to public school, where they would not receive the same religious education as their siblings, or to send them to a yeshiva, where they would likely struggle both socially and academically.

Today, thanks to the efforts of these and other families — and to the passion of Sinai Schools Dean Laurette Rothwachs — families of special-needs children can have the best of both worlds.

Rothwachs remembers the efforts of the Fair Lawn families, “who were approaching schools and asking for their children with developmental disabilities to be accepted into a yeshiva and be offered special educational services in that environment.”

Sympathizing with their plight, educator Wallace Greene, then principal of the Hebrew Youth Academy in Livingston (now the Joseph Kushner Hebrew Academy), called Rothwachs, an old friend, and asked for her help.

“He knew I was doing this in Brooklyn at the time, running programs for kids with special needs,” she said. “I don’t know how he did it, but he convinced me to relocate, move to Fair Lawn, and start this program [at his school] for the three children.”

Sinai has since touched some 1,000 children and their families, “educating them and transforming their lives,” said Rabbi Mark Karasick, a Teaneck resident and chair of the Sinai board.

Rothwachs — who will become dean emeritus in September — will be honored at the school’s annual fundraiser on Feb. 13 for her many years of service. She will receive the Lev VaNefesh Award “for being the heart and soul of what we began and what we’ve become,” said Karasick.

“I thought we were doing an exciting thing [in 1982], not realizing that two months later, there would be two more children, and the next year, children applying from all different communities,” she said. “Once people saw there was a possibility they hadn’t dreamed of, enrollment continued to grow.”

For her part, Laurette Rothwachs is extremely proud of what the school has accomplished.

“Now everybody wants it,” she said of the program, which this year serves some 100 students, most from Bergen County. “Not only is it important in and of itself, but think of all those [alumni] now out there and how they’re doing in their own families and communities.”

Rothwachs credits Sinai with fostering a “sea change” in the community’s understanding of special needs, showing that children with a variety of disabilities can be served successfully.

“Whatever we did, I knew we had to do a very good job,” she said. “It was a turning point. We didn’t want people to feel that they were compromising, making a

choice” between quality education and special services. “We had both,” she said, pointing out that the school is accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools.

According to Moshe Weinberger, Sinai’s president, it is the only Jewish school for special needs that has such accreditation, “and it’s not an easy thing to get.”

Rothwachs said she thinks of the school as unique “because we try to meet the needs of the community and serve a broad spectrum of kids. Most schools specialize in one thing, for example, autistic children or learning disabilities, but we try to service a wide spectrum.”

Schools throughout the country have modeled themselves after Sinai, she said, “visiting us to see what we’re doing and replicate it.”

The Sinai program works through self-contained classes in host schools, “where the students benefit as much as they can from the host school,” said Rothwachs. Depending on their ability, some Sinai students participate in the school’s social activities, others in academic courses.

“Some are very capable, off the charts in their academic ability,” she said, pointing out that one third-grader is doing 10th-grade math but is prevented by an anxiety disorder from being mainstreamed.

Another child, who entered the program as “a selective mute,” will soon be leaving to teach at a seminary in Israel.

Sinai modules exist in several schools. The first one, founded in 1982 at what is now Kushner, was embraced eagerly by Rabbi Alvin Marcus, now rabbi emeritus of Cong. AABJ&D in West Orange, and former head of the board of education of the school. He and his wife, Marilyn, will be honored at the Feb. 13 event with the Rabbinic Leadership Award. Also receiving awards are school supporters Scott and Abby Herschmann and Dr. Bruce and Sheryl Schainker.



Laurette Rothwachs



Rabbi Yisrael Rothwachs



Moshe Weinberger

Other Sinai programs are located at the Rosenbaum Yeshiva of North Jersey in River Edge and the Torah Academy of Bergen County and Ma’ayanot Yeshiva High School for Girls, both in Teaneck. The Nathan Miller SHELI residence for men serves those young adults over the age of 21 who have finished their formal schooling but need additional help.

As Rothwachs moves into the position of dean emeritus, she will pass the school leadership to her son, Rabbi Dr. Yisrael Rothwachs, a longtime Sinai teacher and current head of the program housed at RYNJ.

“Sruly’ has risen through the ranks from assistant teacher, to teacher, to assistant director, to director,” said Karasick. “He has taught in and/or directed every one of our schools.”

Not only does he hold a master’s degree in special education and a doctorate in educational supervision and administration, said Karasick, but “growing up in the Rothwachs’ home, he has been exposed to every facet of Sinai since he was a small child. He has a profound understanding of what and why we are and a deep love for our children.”

In her new position, Laurette Rothwachs said, she will focus on “accessing community partnerships,” working with local schools to help them identify and service children with special needs. But, she added, it was the right time to step back.

“There’s a need for younger people to move up and take responsibility,” she said. “It was the right time to make this happen.”

Still, she said, challenges remain. “Despite the wonderful work we do, we’re still asking parents to pay an amount beyond anyone’s ability to do so,” said Rothwachs.

With a tuition of \$45,000 — and many families sending more than one child to the school — the facility offers many scholarships. Monies are used primarily “to get the finest educators for all of the therapies needed,” she said.

In addition, she said, “stigma is still an issue. It’s getting better, but it’s still hard for people, especially when there are children who would benefit from this but who are borderline, who fit in [to their schools] but are struggling and don’t feel good about themselves. It’s hard to stigmatize your child by putting him into a program for special needs.”

Nevertheless, she said, the community is much more accepting than it used to be. And, she suggested, “the next generation won’t have the problem.” Children in the host schools living side by side with Sinai students “won’t see them as different. They see them as buddies learning in a different class. The line of demarcation has been lessened.”

With all her accomplishments, Rothwachs is most proud of her students, “kids who really have it hard sometimes and have so much to overcome. I learn from them. When I’m ready to give up, I watch them and see what they’re accomplishing.”

Weinberger said the Feb. 13 fund-raising event will include a video depicting the growth of the school since 1982.

As Rothwachs built it up, “it was not about ‘good enough’ but about ‘excellence,’” he said. “She always asked ‘What is the state of the art?’”

The presentation will include interviews with Sinai parents as well as with former Sinai students “who can really talk about what it meant,” said Weinberger.

The event, which typically draws some 650 people and raised about \$1.2 million last year, is very important to the school, he said, pointing out that some 75 percent of Sinai families need “very significant financial aid, and the bulk comes from this dinner.” The school is hoping to raise a similar amount this year, when economic conditions have affected not only families’ incomes but the school’s donor base as well.

“Fortunately, we’re a priority for so many people,” he said. “We’re blessed like that. The community has risen to the occasion.”

What: Sinai Schools annual fund-raiser

When: Sunday, Feb. 13, 4:45 p.m.

Where: Marriott Glenpointe Hotel, Teaneck

Information: Sinaischools.org/dinner