

From the Vancouver Business Journal

Rethinking our backyard

Local businesswomen travel to Ukraine orphanage to see Jewish Business Network's financial aid in action

BY MEGAN PATRICK of the VBJ
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Although just a young organization, the Jewish Business Network of Clark County has taken its mission to provide aid to its local and extended family to heart.

Last year, the network of about 30 Southwest Washington business people, raised \$30,000 for its three major causes: The Family Fund that provides financial support to local families in need through clothing and grocery gift cards and temporary financial relief in times of crisis; scholarships to Camp Gan Israel, a local summer program for children; and the Good Family Orphanage in Odessa, Ukraine.

The heart of faith

At the turn of the century, Odessa was 60 percent to 80 percent Jewish. The pogroms devastated the Jewish community there, and then World War II and Nazism decimated what was left. With the rise of Communism, Jews living in Odessa were forced to give up their faith or hide it.

"Out of those ashes, we're seeing regrowth and faith," said Washougal communications specialist Anne Friendly. "We're seeing what a Jewish community can do when they put their minds to it."

Now there are about 30,000 Jews in the city of about 1 million people.

Anne Friendly and Stephanie Hatton, president of Camas-based Goof Proof Services, recently returned from a week at the orphanage in Odessa to learn about its needs and the community as a whole. Both are members of the Jewish Business Network.

The Good Family Orphanage was born six years ago when a grandmother arrived at an Odessa synagogue with three children whose mother had just been murdered. She was unable to care for the children and had nowhere else to turn.

Now 55 children live at the orphanage, seven of whom have been adopted by founders Rabbi Avraham Wolff and his wife Chaya.

Most residents are children who have been abandoned or whose parents cannot afford to care for them.

A 'machine of outreach'

With support from donors across the world, the orphanage has grown into a "machine of outreach," providing 8,000 packaged kosher meals a day to needy families and operating five schools, including a high school and a new university – the Jewish University of Finance and Economics, Hatton said.

The JBN provides financial support for "extras" for the children, including kung fu classes for the boys and modern dance classes for the girls.

"Our help lets them be like kids," Hatton said.

Since the fall of Communism, the Jewish community has gained strength in Ukraine, but the country is still in pain. There is a great divide between the rich and poor, and the poor are very, very poor, she said.

Substance abuse and poverty are factors in why many of the children live at the orphanage.

Rabbi Shmulik Greenberg, who founded the JBN with his wife Tzivie, said civic service has been part of the network's mission from the beginning.

"This is part of a Judaism belief – when two people get together, a third person has to benefit," he said. "We are working to accomplish something for the world."

Friendly said she and Hatton saw this in action.

While the women were there, they experienced a private performance by a 14-year-old girl who was given up by her mother. She has studied violin for eight years, and the orphanage pays for a professional lesson two days a week.

Another day, Hatton and Friendly took three teenage girls shopping for new coats. Odessa is a fashionable city and clothes are expensive, but the women said Rabbi Wolff sees importance in the girls blending in with their classmates.

"They're already set apart because they're orphans," Hatton said. "The Rabbi wears hand-me-down suits, but he insists the girls have new clothes."

The world is our backyard

Friendly said she came back with a passion.

"What it did for me was to recognize how a community based in the strictness of the ultra-orthodox Jewish community can mobilize people to do more than be a faith community," she said.

Hatton said she has never been so touched by any experience except the birth of her kids.

"I gained respect for the Chabad community and what it's able to do," she said. "I thought it would be a one-off for me – a lucky break that I got to go, but I made an emotional connection. I have to see them again before they grow up."

An anonymous donor paid for part of the trip for both women.

With the help of Gray Hughes of Portland-based Digital Rain Films, the women are creating a presentation about their trip for JBN's Monte Carlo Night and raffle fundraiser on Feb. 9 that will show how the group's efforts can move the orphanage's mission forward.

"Seeing what they've done helps me extend my idea of what our backyard is," Friendly said. "Where we've got the resources to give, let's think of the whole world as our backyard."

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