

NEW JERSEY JewishStandard

The gift of learning

Local rabbi finds unique way to honor her father's 77th

Lois Goldrich | Local |

Published: 02 March 2012

Debra Orenstein, rabbi of Congregation B'nai Israel in Emerson, wanted to find a meaningful way to honor her father on his upcoming 77th birthday.

"I thought hard about what we could do for my dad," she said. Her father — Rabbi Jehiel Orenstein, who led Congregation Beth-El in South Orange for 35 years, now rabbi emeritus — has ALS, "a very isolating disease, among other problems," she explained. "Connecting and socializing become more difficult."

To honor him publicly — and help support his lifelong passion for Jewish education — Orenstein and her family came up with two ideas.

First, together with her husband, Craig Weisz, and nephew, Michael Greenberg, Orenstein created a website www.jehielorensteininspires.com intended originally for immediate family and friends. Now, she said, people from all over are using the site to send greetings and pay tribute to her father.



Rabbi Debra Orenstein, of Congregation B'nai Israel in Emerson, and her father, Rabbi Jehiel Orenstein. Courtesy Rabbi Debra Orenstein

The website has an additional purpose, as well, she said, encouraging visitors "to take on worthy projects and mitzvot in honor of a wonderful man."

The family also organized a special event for March 4 (3-5 p.m.), to be held at the Solomon Schechter Day School in New Milford. Attendance is free, but guests are asked to contribute to the school's scholarship fund. The gathering is expected to draw some 200 people.

The party has been custom-designed for her father, said Orenstein, noting that it will include his favorite dessert (ice cream) and feature his three favorite cantors and one of his favorite colleagues.

In addition, she said, "My father will be receiving a lifetime achievement award from the New York Board of Rabbis, and he will also be acknowledged by the New Jersey State Police, for whom he was a volunteer chaplain for many years.

"We decided to make a party because we don't want to let a simchah go by," said Orenstein, a seventh-generation rabbi in her clergy-laden family, and the first woman to hold that position. "For the creation of the party, we wanted to bring in his favorite people and things."

For example, she explained, her father was both a magician and a concert pianist before becoming a rabbi. The party will therefore include a magician for the children, and Prof. Arbie Orenstein of Queens College and the New York Philharmonic will perform piano pieces.

Rabbi Gordon Tucker, former dean of The Jewish Theological Seminary Rabbinical School, and David Javerbaum, former chief writer of the Daily Show and author of several best-selling humor books, will be featured guests. Three cantors, including Cantor Lenny Mandel of Congregation B'nai Israel, will sing.

Orenstein said that when she broached the idea of the party to her father, he said that it should not be about him — absolutely no gifts — but rather should raise money for tzedakah. When the daughter suggested collecting money for ALS,

he said it should go instead to the Schechter school's scholarship fund.

Two of his grandchildren — 5-year-old kindergartener Hannah Mathilda and 7-year-old second-grader Emmett — attend the New Milford school.

When she was growing up, said Orenstein, who, together with her siblings, attended Schechter schools, "He paid for others behind the scenes. He didn't always have the money, but he went and did quiet fundraising. I only learned about that a few years ago."

Given her father's penchant for tzedakah, Orenstein decided that the website should be a place "where people could remember some of those times he inspired them and do more good in the world because of him." Visitors to the site already are making pledges of things to do in his honor, she said, whether study projects, prayer practices, or acts of lovingkindness.

Her own two children are participating as well, going through the Jewish Children's Encyclopedia "letter by letter, then doing a siyum and reporting their favorite entry under that letter. We have a party [using] foods beginning with that letter." They keep their grandfather apprised of their progress.

Describing her father as "one of funniest people I know, and one of the kindest," the Emerson rabbi said people tell her that when he speaks from a pulpit, "They feel he's speaking just to them. He has such a personal way of connecting with everyone, even if speaking to a great number of people.

"He was very deceptive," she said. "He made the rabbinate look completely easy," adding that he is both a great teacher and an easy-going human being. Still, she said, "As learned as he is, he's very humble, totally unpretentious."

Orenstein said her father's "proudest achievement in the rabbinate is probably that he created a really wonderful community at Congregation Beth-El, not just a synagogue, but a true community. People support one another, learn together, do mitzvot together."

Jehiel has been married to Sylvia Orenstein (née Mowshowitz) for 52 years. They have three children — Aviva, Debra, and Raphael — and seven grandchildren: David, Michael, Ben, Elliot, Sam, Emmett, and Hannah Mathilda.

The family encourages people interested in attending the March 4 event to make a reservation by contacting Craig Weisz (crweisz@mac.com), providing both their name and the number of people in their party.