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Where Everybody Knows Their Names

German restitution funds provide social and support club for Sheepshead Bay Holocaust survivors.

LEHMAN WEICHSELBAUM - Jewish Week Correspondent

After the bad times come the good times.

Beginning this week, some of those good times are coming to Holocaust survivors living in the Brooklyn shorefront community that includes Sheepshead Bay, Brighton Beach and Manhattan Beach.



The source of festivities is Club 2600, a new monthly get-together held at the Jay Senior Center at 2600 Ocean Ave. (hence the name). The afternoon club is a joint project of the Jewish Community Council of Greater Coney Island and the Shorefront Jewish Community Council in Brighton Beach and is being funded by a grant from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany.

The grant is part of a larger restitution package provided by the German government that is directly aimed at community projects for European Jewish survivors of World War II now residing in the United States.

Club 2600 will be a place "for peer support and to socialize," said Chani Jacobowitz, site director of the Shorefront Jewish Community Council. For the most part, it will be a simple coffeehouse arrangement of tables and chairs, encouraging older people with a shared experience of pain to "sit together and talk about what's good in their lives," according to Jacobowitz. There will be a kosher meal, as well as entertainment and a social worker on hand for the "facilitation of group sharing." The club will be free to all drop-ins.

"We'll start with a small core and hope to build by word of mouth," Jacobowitz said. Future activities, she continued, will be determined by club members themselves.

Rabbi Moshe Wiener, executive director of both the Jewish Community Council of Greater Coney Island and the Shorefront Jewish Community Council, admitted that Club 2600 shared some similarities with other drop-in programs for survivors elsewhere but anticipated that the club will provide "more professional opportunities, more presentations to stimulate thought."

"Innovation is the key," said Darlene Foscale, the Jay center's director. "It won't be a place of sadness, but of happiness."

Jacobowitz said that the fresh trauma of the World Trade Center bombings, felt especially keenly by Holocaust survivors, gave an extra layer of urgency to the enterprise. At the same time, she cautioned, "It will be a therapeutic resource, but it won't be therapy. We want members to feel ownership, to feel that this is their place. It's not a program. It's a club."

Added Rabbi Wiener: "Hopefully Club 2600 will assist survivors to find the courage and perseverance to continue their lives."

"The target population has not yet been touched in this particular way," said Foscale. "It's one way of giving back to the people who suffered at the hands of Germany and to make sure it never happens again."

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Transportation for visitors to the site will be arranged where needed.

The \$90,000 Claims Conference grant is to be divided three ways: the Hatikva program at the Shorefront Y of Brighton-Manhattan Beach geared to Holocaust survivors from the former Soviet Union, the Friendly Visiting program that sends student and older volunteers to the homes of survivor shut-ins and Club 2600.

Jacobowitz pointed out that the club is primarily intended for non-Russian survivors who had settled shorefront neighborhoods decades before the Russian migrations that began in the 1960s. She explained that survivors from Russia and survivors from other parts of Europe had vastly different wartime experiences, creating different social needs.

Rabbi Wiener said that Claims Conference funds were already sustaining efforts to provide entitlement advocacy, home care and transportation to medical centers for local Holocaust survivors.

Said the Jay Center's Foscale: "The Holocaust generation will have to heal, so the next generation doesn't forget."

Club 2600 complements an existing program run by Selfhelp Community Services of Brooklyn, in which some 50 to 60 survivors per month gather at the Heritage Institute at the Haym Solomon Home for the Aged in Bensonhurst. That program has grown since it began in 1994, to the extent that Selfhelp is in the process of hiring a new case worker to coordinate those invited to attend.

"The original dream is still the same dream — to give survivors an opportunity to socialize with other survivors in an elegant, café house setting," says Tova Klein, Brooklyn programs director of Selfhelp. "It's an opportunity for people to get out."

The SelfHelp program is also funded by the Claims Conference settlement, which covers entertainment and transportation expenses, while the nursing home provides food.

Klein said because the program is not a drop-in center, anxiety over the Sept. 11 terror attacks had not had much impact on participation. "This is a place where people socialize in a way that's not really about seeking help," she said. "You don't have to talk about the stuff that bothers you. It's understood and everybody is on the same page." n

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