

Jews of Winchester, Va., work to create a center for Jewish life

AUGUST 12, 2019 BY JACQUELINE HYMAN

About 70 miles west of Arlington, Winchester, Va. is a small town with a Jewish population of some 85 families there and in the surrounding Shenandoah Valley area.

On a summer day, people happily stroll through Old Town Winchester's walking mall and stop by local boutiques, restaurants and museums, like the Shenandoah Valley Civil War Museum, in an old courthouse that was used during the war as a hospital and barracks.

With just one synagogue in a 25-mile radius, the Jewish families are dedicated and tight knit, working together to create a center for Jewish life and culture.

Beth El Congregation

Beth El Congregation isn't just a building where people go to attend services – it's a community.

It's a place where congregants spend hours taking handles off of kitchen cabinets, repainting and reinstalling, so that the synagogue's decades-old kosher kitchen can stay up to date. Where members volunteer to lead services because the synagogue doesn't have a full-time rabbi. Where, when the synagogue need new chairs for the sanctuary, members take out their checkbooks and ask, "How much do you need?"

Rabbi Scott Sperling said this is one of the advantages of being a small congregation. In 2013, the building underwent major renovations that added space and a much-needed elevator, and turned the building's front into its back.

"It's great to know that folks in the congregation care enough about our community's spiritual home to put their time and energy and financial resources to making it as nice as possible," he said.

In 1954, the Winchester Jewish community decided to erect the building that became Beth El Congregation. Now, there are about 75 families involved with the synagogue, Sperling said.

"What I love here is because of the size, we are family," said Ellen Zimmerman, Beth El's president.

Beth El is a Reform synagogue that caters to families in towns all around Winchester. There are no other synagogues nearby, so Beth El is a mixed community that tries to include more than just Reform Jews.

"I know that I'm doing things right when people complain that the service has become too Conservative, or when people who are from the Conservative movement tell me that it's become too Reform," Sperling said.

Former mayor Charles Zuckerman, 95, has deep roots and influence in Winchester, and is a founding member of Beth El Congregation.

"Charles would never think of himself as *the* founder [of Beth El], he was a founder of the congregation," said Sperling. "But Charles looms large in our legend because he was the only Jewish mayor that Winchester has had, and a very popular figure to say the least."

Zuckerman was mayor of Winchester from 1980 to 1989, and before that was a city council member for 16 years.

"You don't become mayor of a small town without having people really know you and have confidence in who you are and what you're gonna do for your city," Sperling said.

This year, Beth El is partnering with the Institute of Southern Jewish Life in Jackson, Miss., which will allow to use the institute's religious school curriculum, bring in speakers and host other events.

The Zuckerman family contributed to the recent renovation by donating the cost of three classrooms for religious school, Zimmerman said. "Three classrooms sounds small, but for us it's three beautiful classrooms now."

Chabad comes to Winchester

Rabbi Yishai and Bluma Dinerman moved to Winchester in July, but they already know its Jewish community well. The Dinermans have been hosting holiday programs in Northern Virginia for about three years because Bluma's sister and her husband run the Chabad of Shenandoah Valley in Harrisonburg, Bluma said.

Two years ago they had a crazy experience in Winchester hosting a menorah lighting for Chanukah.

They planned to serve frozen latkes, Yishai said, which they would heat up in portable frying pans at the event. They cleared it with the Health Department a month prior, but two hours before the event, Yishai said, the Health Department told him the latkes had to be cooked before the event in a commercial oven. Yishai Dinerman ran all around Winchester looking for a restaurant that would allow him to cook his latkes in its oven.

Just as he was about to give up, Yishai ran into Winchester Mayor John David Smith Jr., who stopped by Old Town Winchester to check on the menorah lighting. Yishai explained his predicament to the mayor.

"Did you know I own a restaurant?" Smith asked, according to Yishai.

So Smith brought Yishai to his restaurant and told his chefs to let Yishai use the ovens for his latkes — and, by double-wrapping the latkes in foil to keep them kosher, the menorah lighting was saved.

The Dinermans moved here from Brooklyn, N.Y., and have two young daughters. The Winchester Chabad has an online fundraising campaign, which will help the Dinermans host programs from their home and support students at Shenandoah University.

'Fiddler' in the Shenandoah

A 10-minute drive from Beth El is Shenandoah University, whose Jewish students are often involved at the synagogue. Sperling said the students often volunteer to lead services and teach children in the religious school.

Those who want a taste of homemade challah must wait for a Winchester visit from the Challah Lady. That's the name Robin Millstone uses to sell her challah and other treats she's concocted at Hawksbill Trading Company in Luray.

Millstone, who lived in Winchester for 30 years, has been baking since 1990. Over time, and with lots of experimentation, she has developed her own recipes — all using her original base challah dough.

Cinnamon babka is one of Millstone's bestsellers. Millstone's personal favorite from her menu are the challah knots, or bagelach.

During the high holidays, Millstone delivers her challah to Beth El, a little over an hour drive. Last year, she said, she drove them over in the flood — her daughter told her to drive home immediately.

"I couldn't even stay for services," she said, but she brought the usual raisin and plain challah loaves anyway. In the past, she's brought anywhere between 12 and 24 challot for the synagogue.

"You always pride yourself when you can do something and do it well enough that other people enjoy it," she said. "I just really like to make things that people enjoy."

Sometimes, Beth El partners with the Alamo Theater to do movie screenings of Jewish interest. The movies might be intense — the last one was "The Invisibles," about four young Jews who survive in the Third Reich. Others are more lighthearted.

Said Zimmerman, "When we did 'Fiddler on the Roof,' we dressed up. We had pretend Shabbos

candles that people lit up.”

jhyman@midatlanticmedia.com

[@jacqbh58](#)
