

Congregations

The Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation's Beit Sefer

Rebecca Ball, special to the WJN

The Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation's (AARC) Beit Sefer, a religious school that welcomes the children of non-members as well as members, will be holding an Open House at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Ann Arbor on Sunday, May 1, from 9:30 to 11:30 a.m. During the Open House prospective students can attend classes during a normal school day and parents

them to the goal of the Civil Rights Movement: equality. The students realized, Schlanger said, that "you don't kill people, or steal from them, or lie to them, because those other people are equal to you. Their lives matter, their stuff matters, their feelings matter." Ethical discussions such as this one help students to bring together the ideals of Judaism with what they see and know about the world around them.



can either sit in on the classes and enjoy the day's activities, or talk with other students' parents and the school's director, Clare Kinberg, to determine whether the Beit Sefer might provide a rewarding experience for their own children.

The Beit Sefer delivers individualized attention and creative instruction for kindergarten through pre-b'nei mitzvah children. The teachers, experienced and learned in Jewish education, are assisted by enthusiastic teen-aged members of the AARC. There are three classrooms, divided by general age level. For young elementary age children (K-2), the K'tanim classroom focuses on the joy of learning through storytelling, movement and relationships. The Yeladim class, for grades 3-4, brings together games and activities with a stronger academic focus. Finally, 5-7 graders participate in the G'dolim class, which is characterized by discussion and more formal instruction. All three classes give attention to multiple areas of Jewish learning, including Bible stories, Hebrew language holidays, prayers, Jewish culture around the world, and ethical issues.

This learning is accomplished through engaging activities, which often involve the whole family. Parents and students together built and decorated a sukkah with greenery the students gathered. And all three classes prepared to lead prayer during the AARC's Shabbat services. All the classes participate in Hebrew instruction; the older students learn Hebrew through an online learning platform, while the elementary kids participate in the Hebrew Through Movement program, which uses a kinesthetic learning model, allowing the students to use their bodies to run and jump and play while they learn the Hebrew letters and words.

Giving students a stake in their community, and connecting them to issues facing society, is also a key aspect of the Beit Sefer. For Martin Luther King day, AARC co-chair Margo Schlanger, a professor at the University of Michigan Law School, led a discussion about the Ten Commandments. Schlanger helped the students to work out an understanding of the principles behind the commandments, which connected

For another recent Beit Sefer project, the students gathered together donations from members of the AARC for Jewish Family Services to create welcome baskets for refugee families resettling in Washtenaw County. AARC Beit Sefer teacher Sharon Alvandi, a student in the U-M Jewish Communal Leadership Program, took the lead to organize this important community service project. Once assembled, the welcome baskets--dish soap, towels, sheets, cleaning supplies and other necessities--were donated to JFS and provided to new refugee families. The youngest students created cards for the families to welcome them to their new homes. Not only did this project inspire understanding of the ethical principles of generosity and of welcoming the stranger, it also served as a launch pad for important historical discussions about such topics as the violence and war that have too often decimated communities.

The director of the Beit Sefer, Clare Kinberg, has introduced a focus this year on project-based learning. Students' own curiosity about a topic surfaces driving questions that they investigate; they then present their discoveries to other students and parents, who assemble weekly at the end of school. Rather than merely being lectured or preached at, this approach allows the students the space to explore, discover, and release their own inspiration. Through this interactive and personal method of learning, young people feel an enthusiasm and connection to their Jewishness that has unfortunately all too often been stamped out of young people by more traditional religious schools. According to Kinberg, "AARC seeks to inspire its students to be knowledgeable and comfortable enough with Jewish tradition to feel free to innovate, adding their own links to *di goldene kayt* (the golden chain) of Jewish civilization."

The AARC Beit Sefer meets at the Ann Arbor Jewish Community Center on Sunday mornings from 9:30-11:30 a.m. September through May. For more information see <http://aarecon.org/what-we-do/learning/religious-school/>. The Open House, on May 1, begins at 9:30 a.m. All are welcome. ■