

PIZZA IN THE HUT - A RECAP

by Berenice Famiñ



Crowds of exuberant children, parents, and teen volunteers stood in line patiently waiting to be served a delicious pizza feast in the Friendship Circle's sukkah.

The Friendship Circle of Los Angeles, a nonprofit organization that provides programs and support to children with special needs and their families, held this fun filled "Pizza In The Hut" event in celebration of Sukkot.

Teen volunteers bonded with their special buddies through a bevy of activities ranging from outdoor play, an amazing Mad Science show, sukkot story time and music. The kids also had a chance to participate in arts and crafts activities, such as coloring pictures of sukkahs and given their own simcha torah goodie bag (sponsored in honor of Mandy Galeck's Bat Mitzvah), where they were able to decorate their own mini torahs. Additionally, parents of the special needs children had the pleasure of attending A Parent Workshop titled "Nutrition for Healthier Families" by Dr. Pamela Abramson-Levine.

One of the most memorable aspects of the event was the active part a special needs child's father Label Lazaroff took in guiding each of the youngsters on how to shake and recite the blessing for the lulav and etrog. You could see the excitement written on the kids' faces as they got their hands on the lulav and Label's delight in playing a role in such a momentous occasion. He specifically said, "I felt that this would be a nice contribution to such a meaningful event."

Another shining contributor in attendance was child behaviorist Michelle May, whose role at the Friendship Circle is to offer strategies to help the kids get involved and provide tools for the teen volunteers in getting through any difficult period that may arise while spending time with a child who has special needs. Working for the Friendship Circle for over three years, May says, "The volunteers who come to work with the children are really here for the kids, not just to fulfill community service hours. You can tell it is meaningful for them and that is a big reason why I love working for this organization."

First time volunteer Lauren Okhovat, a freshman at Milken Community High School, was compelled to join Friendship Circle because of her big sister's high praise of the organization as a former teen volunteer. Okhovat mentioned, "I really wanted to be apart of the support system offered to these special needs kids and I love how the organization ties in Judaic aspects to their programs." Okhovat shared a similar admiration for the organization as May in that she too believed that the people who are involved with the Friendship Circle are incredibly dedicated and genuinely care about the children.

The joyous "Pizza In The Hut" sukkah party, planned by Holiday Program Coordinator Chanie Lazaroff, was truly an unforgettable experience that created a sense of camaraderie and unification among the children, parents and teen volunteers. It was a feeling that surely left a lasting impression on all those who attended.

LET'S PLAY - A RECAP

by Berenice Famili

United as one, a Darko Elementary student sat beside a Friendship Circle buddy, as they shared a siddur and began davening together. Beautiful little moments like these ensued throughout the newly launched "Let's Play" program, where children of all abilities gathered to play side by side at the Friendship Circle of Los Angeles.

The program, which is in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles and falls under the Joint Special Needs Task Force for Jewish Education and Engagement, had these Darko Elementary School children, paired up with one of the Friendship Circle kids, where bonds quickly developed.

The Darko Elementary School kids, who are apart of the only Jewish Elementary School In Los Angeles that is based on the principle of educating every child according to his/her own pace, joined The Friendship Circle kids for an hour of entertaining Judaic themed activities and kosher snacks. The kids first basked in the therapeutic opportunity to bake their own challah. Each pair was given dough and an assortment of special treats like chocolate chips and sprinkles to decorate their specially crafted challahs.



The "Let's Play" together theme continued as The Darko Elementary School kids and The Friendship Circle kids sat together in a circle as they recited the blessing for Hamotzi and sang a slew of Hebrew songs. The final portion of the hour took place at 'My Backyard,' The Friendship Circle's state of the art inclusive playground, where all the children got to play with one another.

Ten-year-old wheel chair bound newcomer Hannah had a monumental moment during the playground activities. The "Let's Play" event served as the first time Hannah had the chance to finally ride a carousel that accommodated her special needs, while she received support from her Darko Elementary School buddy and her mother cheering by the sidelines.

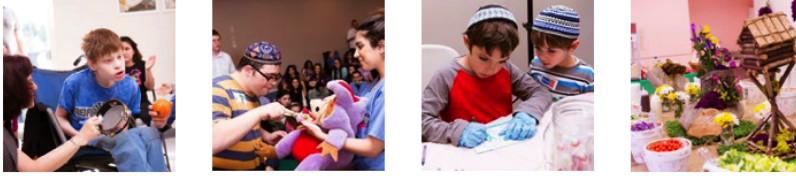
Noa Hami's seven-year-old son Jojo, who has been apart of the Friendship Circle for about four years, is another example of a kid who appeared to be having a blast while participating in the "Let's Play" event. As his mother watched in sheer delight, she specifically said, "I love the idea behind this program. It gives my son the opportunity to interact with other kids outside of the home."

Friendship Circle's Program Coordinator, Chanie Lazaroff, who led and directed the "Let's Play" event," discussed the benefits of the program, saying, "Very often kids with special needs are not able to access these types of programs because of their difficulty interacting with other children, but with this program, our children will be able to be themselves and have fun in an environment where they feel safe and accepted."

The program, which will now be held once a month, not only serves as a positive way to provide the kids with special needs a sense of inclusion, but also offers an educational experience for typical kids to realize that these kids with special needs are kids who just want to take pleasure in the same fun activities that any other kid would enjoy. The peer-to-peer engagement established within the program will surely create a life-changing experience for all the kids involved.

TU B'SHEVAT RECAP & PICS

By Berenice Famili



A momentous Tu B'Shvat celebration took place at Friendship Circle of Los Angeles on Sunday February 1. Crowds of children, parents, and volunteers filled Friendship Circle to participate in a bountiful of enjoyable activities. Some of the afternoon festivities included, Tu B'Shvat arts and crafts, a delicious lunch buffet, interactive story time, drum circle, planting activities, and a parent workshop.

One of the most exciting features of the day was the UCLA School of Dentistry's Interactive dental demo, where the FCLA kids learned how to properly brush and floss their teeth. After watching a fun video about how to maintain healthy dental hygiene, the children had the opportunity to have a special dental consultation with UCLA dental students.

As Resident Physicians of Pediatric Dentistry, Shiva Borukhim and Arina Hartunian, who were both overlooking the dental students during the consultations, explained that the Alpha Omega Dental Fraternity were involved in collaborating with Friendship Circle as part of their community outreach program. This ongoing yearly collaboration has been taking place in conjunction with Tu B'Shvat because it's a holiday engulfed around the importance of taking good care of one's self.

Borukhim, who was also a former Friendship Circle volunteer, had a heartwarming experience to share. She stated: "FC has been a part of my life for a really long time. This year has been especially memorable. I saw two of the children I used to volunteer with and they actually remembered me after 12 years. They greeted me in excitement and couldn't believe to see me now as a dentist. Personally, to see how much they have grown, really touched me. I am so happy to still be apart of the community here. The fact that there has been such a big turn out with the dental students and the dedication from them to keep this going is amazing to see. Almost all the dental students are first years and they are so eager and asking lots of questions. They are not getting any type of commendations here. It's clear they want to be here, even on a Sunday. To watch this come full circle is really nice."

Another fantastic addition to the event was the Challenger Buddy Baseball League orientation. This recreational league, which is hosted under the Beverly Hills Little League, gives children and young adults with special needs the chance to play baseball in a unique way. Basically, the kids with special needs are each paired with a buddy, who will assist players with batting, fielding and running the bases. There are no outs and there are really no rules, except to have fun. Brooke Goldberg, who is in charge of running the program with Jon Goldberg, explained that the creation of this special league, "Gives children and young adults with disabilities the opportunity to do something in an inclusive setting. It's just as meaningful for the buddies to go out and to help community members. They are forming relationships with kids they might not have otherwise formed relationships with. It really is a great opportunity for the community at large."

The inclusion of Sinal Akiba Academy teacher Rebecca Berger and her students made for an added shining moment. Every homeroom at Sinal Akiba does a Tikkun Olam project and Berger's homeroom chose Friendship Circle.

Volunteer and Friendship Circle Intern Jasmine Ghalchi appeared deeply attentive and highly enthusiastic while working with her buddy. As a junior at UCLA with a minor in disability studies, Ghalchi's deep admiration for the organization was quickly apparent as she spoke about her experience thus far. "FC gives children support and acceptance. There are amazing volunteers and staff here. It gives people a good way to interact with the children and accept them for who they are. With pursuing my minor, learning more about FC and having communication with these children, I hope to some day become a Physician's Assistant and continue to advocate for children with disabilities. I will continue to encourage, praise and accept them."

The event closed with a Torah Teens & Young Adults plant sale. All of the proceeds gained would benefit TTYA, which is a new program that provides Jewish teens and young adults with social interaction and life skills, while cultivating strong Jewish identity.

Friendship Circle of Los Angeles once again held a truly incredible event that has surely created a memorable experience for all who attended.