

“Art for Learning” Offers a Summer of Art and Culture with Kosher Food

By Betty Schwartz

Like many Jewish parents with children in day schools, Englewood resident Sheryl Intrator Urman was pleased with the dual-curriculum, but she wished that, in addition to the hefty doses of *limudei kodesh* and secular subjects, her youngsters and their friends could be exposed to art, both creatively and to gain appreciation for the classics. Fourteen years ago, Mrs. Urman, an artist, art educator, historian, and museum guide, leaped into the breach and created Art for Learning, an after-school and summer program geared to balancing Jewish children’s education. Her goal is to teach children how to look at art and to analyze the techniques necessary to create it. “Art helps children on many levels. It helps them analyze information, builds hand-eye coordination, and helps them relax,” she says. “Art is a necessary skill in itself. It is a window to understanding history and culture.” That is why history is crucial to all her art classes, she says. A class in Medieval Art, for example, might start with the group reading Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* and include a trip to the Cloisters Museum in upper Manhattan. “Children don’t know how much they’re learning. They just soak up the information,” she says, recalling a little girl who had participated in her Impressionism class last summer. When the family went on vacation, the parents were astounded when the child looked at the paintings in the hotel and announced, “Look, Mommy, there’s a Monet on the wall.”

36 Programs

This summer, Art for Learning will offer 36 week-long programs for children in grades 1-11. The art classes feature a variety of periods including Impressionism, Modern, Colonial, and Victorian. There is a program just on mosaics and another on the art of China and Japan. There is a “Jewish-Immigrant Experience” program and another for those who want a “Princess Experience.” Other programs focus on zoo and farm animals, dinosaurs, and fish. Each art program includes two relevant field trips, which might be to the Metropolitan Museum of Art or to survey Victorian mansions. Art lessons are sometimes given in Central Park, in zoos, or on farms.

Fashion Programs

Students in grades 4-11 can participate in Art for Learning’s fashion programs, which offer children the opportunity to meet with fashion designers, marketing and merchandising experts, perfume manufacturers, models, and other professionals involved in the beauty industry. Trips include visiting showrooms, going backstage at Broadway theaters to learn about costume design, and attending age-appropriate lectures at the Fashion Institute of Technology. “In the fashion programs, kids engage in projects involving design concepts, pattern-cutting, sewing, jewelry-making, drawing, fabric design, make-up, and more. They have unique opportunities to be exposed to businesses and professionals in the fashion industry that children normally never experience,” says Mrs. Urman. Art for Learning’s “Teen Tour Travel Program” is for students entering grades 7-11. It includes five days of visits to some of New York’s most significant tourist spots, such as NBC studios, the Empire State Building’s Sky Ride, the historical South Street Seaport, and a walk across the Brooklyn Bridge.

Kosher Food

The programs all begin in Mrs. Urman’s Englewood studio. Participants bring their own lunches, but, for trips, kosher food is provided. All programs end by 2:30pm, leaving participants time to enjoy swimming and other summer activities. Many participants enroll in Art for Learning programs either before or after attending sleepaway camps. Although Mrs. Urman is deeply involved in the programming for each class, she now employs several additional teachers, all trained to see art and children as she does. “This allows us to offer several classes simultaneously,” she says.

Judaica

While all art makes her smile, she does not deny that Judaica combines her two greatest passions. “Jewish art is booming. There are beautiful *ketuboth*, *besamin* boxes, challah covers, jewelry, and other examples constantly being created,” she says. A member of Teaneck’s *Bet Medrash* Art Group, in which participants learn with a rabbi and then create Jewish themed art based on their studies, she used that workshop to complete a series of paintings on the Creation story in Genesis. The paintings are represented by the Borghi Gallery in Englewood and have been featured in several prestigious art shows in New York .

Jewish-Immigrant Experience

Jewish art and history combine to form Art for Learning’s “Jewish-Immigrant Experience.” Participants begin by reading about the experiences of Jewish families who landed on Ellis Island and then made their homes on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Then the group visits Ellis Island, the Tenement Museum , and the Eldridge Street Synagogue. “They have been totally prepped beforehand, so they understand what they are seeing. They get the real flavor of the area by munching on kosher pickles and bialys,” says Mrs. Urman. Afterwards, the youngsters create genealogical scrapbooks by interviewing their parents and grandparents. “They leave space for their own future families,” says Mrs. Urman, who hopes that, some day, these books will be given to her students’ grandchildren.

Long-Term Benefits

With the first graduates of her program now in college, Mrs. Urman says she can see the long-term results of her efforts to expose Jewish students to the creative arts in classes their day schools and yeshivot simply do not have the time to offer. She takes pride in the many former students who have written to her, saying that her classes made them into well rounded adults. “Some have majored in art and others have chosen fashion as a career after taking one of our summer fashion camp sessions,” she says. For more information about Art for Learning summer and after-school programs, visit www.artforlearning.com or call Mrs. Urman at 201-503-9796. “All our programs have been created to make life-long memories. Art makes learning fun,” she says.