

L'Chaim

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Program aids children with special needs

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Families with special needs children in the Jewish community are welcomed into a special circle of friends.

This Friendship Circle began 12 years ago in Detroit and has since mushroomed into 50 U.S. cities as well as South Africa and Australia.

The Circle started four years ago in Broward and South Palm Beach County and currently has 60 special needs families participating in the free program. The children have special needs ranging from Autism and Cerebral Palsy to Downs Syndrome and related behavior and learning difficulties.

Children in Parkland, Coconut Creek, Boca Raton, Margate and Coral Springs are served in the program. Recently a few families from the Hollywood area have also been included in the Circle.

Sarah Biston is director of the Friendship Circle. Her husband, Rabbi Shuey Biston of Chabad of Parkland, raises funds to administer the program, which is an affiliate program of Chabad.

Biston said she was interested in starting the Friendship Circle because a void for its services existed in the community.

"I have cousins with special needs children and learned about this program from people in other communities," said Sarah Biston. "There is a void in the community for these families and the Circle reaches the child



Rabbi Shuey Biston of Chabad of Parkland celebrates the holiday of Sukkot with Rebecca Poznanski, 5, during a Friendship Circle program.

Staff photo/Lindsay Moore

with special needs in various different ways."

Biston said the most popular program offered by the Friendship Circle is the "Friends at Home."

"We recruit teenagers from Jewish day schools and other schools in the community to volunteer in the program," Biston said. "These teenagers go to the home of a special needs child once a week for one hour. They hang out with the children, play games with them and are their buddies."

"The teens who volunteer get community service credit and they also give the parents of the special needs child some respite," Biston said.

The Friendship Circle also has a monthly bowling league that takes place at Boca Bowl and serves chil-

dren four to 18 years of age.

"We have volunteers who assist the special needs children with their bowling," Biston said.

Other activities include Sunday Circles, a monthly program for families at Chabad of Parkland, located at 7170 Loxahatchee Road.

"We have guest speakers who demonstrate activities geared to special needs families," Biston said. "We have yoga, karate and sometimes even cooking lessons. Parents can remain in the room for these activities or go to a separate room and have a discussion group with other parents of special needs children."

Jewish holiday celebrations are also part of the Friendship Circle programming.

"These children often can't go to traditional synagogue services," Biston said. "Their parents are thankful that we provide special Jewish holiday observances for their special needs children."

Yehudis Cattán of Boca Raton is a member of the Friendship Circle. She and her husband, Aaron and special needs child, Dov, 7, think the program fulfills a need in the community.

"The Circle is the best thing that has happened for special needs Jewish children in South Florida," Cattán said. "My son loves going to all of their programs and looks forward to the teenagers visiting him every week."

Bradley Cohen, 17, of Boca Raton, is a volunteer in the program. The Hillel student said he found out about the program from his school.

"I have been volunteering in the Circle of Friendship for about a year," Cohen said. "It makes you feel good to gain the respect of the children you help."

Tali Gafen, 15, of Parkland enjoys volunteering for the Friendship Circle.

"You can really help to make a difference," Gafen said. "It's fun to help someone."

During the recent holiday of Sukkot, a Friendship Circle party took place at Chabad of Parkland.

For more information about the Friendship Circle call Sarah Biston at 954-970-9551.