



COURTESY OF RICK ADELMAN

Rabbi Shuey Biston (above) matches special-needs kids with area teenagers in a program called the Friendship Circle. "Many people say, 'Well, there aren't many of these kids in the community. We never see them at shul,' There's a good reason for that. It's very difficult for parents to take them out and about."

With a Little Help From my Friends

Rabbi Shuey Biston believes children with special needs and their families have enough problems without having to add broken promises to the list. That's why commitment is the cornerstone of the Friendship Circle, a three-year-old project sponsored by the Chabad of North Broward and South Palm Beach that is rapidly gaining momentum.

The Friendship Circle, a concept that originated at a Chabad House in Detroit, is designed to teach special needs children motor and cognitive skills and, most importantly, to enhance their social lives through creating meaningful relationships. Biston's program focuses on Jewish families, although all children are welcome.

"Many people say, 'Well, there aren't many of these kids in the community. We never see them at shul,'" Biston, 27, said. "There's a good reason for that. It's very difficult for parents to take them out and about."

In the last year, Biston added three full-time staff members to help administrate a multi-faceted program that services around 50 young people, ages 4 to 18. Some of the kids are autistic; others have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Down Syndrome or Cerebral Palsy. What makes the Friendship Circle unique, Biston pointed out,



are the 100 or so teenage volunteers from area middle schools and high schools who interact with the children and are required to commit to the program for an entire school year. Many of the teens satisfy their community-service obligations through the Friendship Circle.

"You have to earn the trust and respect of the parents and children," Biston said. "Consistency is the key. Parents are very skeptical. Many times they've been promised programs by Federations and synagogues—they start, they stop. It's difficult for parents to be given something that's suddenly taken away. The child doesn't understand why he or she isn't being serviced anymore. Thank God, I can say we have a pretty good track record."

"Friends at Home," the Friendship Circle's most popular activity, typically sends two teens to visit a child at home for an hour each week. The teens interact with the child through board games, video games, reading or just hanging out. Biston said some kids wait for hours at their windows anticipating the visit.

Friendship Circle programs also include the "Sunday Circle" at Chabad of Parkland that offers special-needs children music, Jewish crafts and physical education; "Shabbat Circle" on Saturdays at the Chabad with Shabbat-centered activities; a monthly bowling outing; and "Mom's Night Out" where mothers can get support, companionship and understanding.

Like most of the parents, Ari Cattani of Boca Raton heard about the Friendship Circle through word of mouth. The visiting teens provide his son, Dov, a highly functioning autistic child who attends public school, with a little taste of Jewish education.

"On the most basic level," Cattani says, "the best thing is that a parent gets one hour of blessed free time. If you think about it, some of these kids require the attention of both of their parents full time. And if you have another child, like we do, this gives us an opportunity to spend time with them."

Biston, who personally raises the funds for the Friendship Circle through private donations, said, "We're picking up about a family a week," and within the next year anticipates servicing 100 children with a roster of 200 volunteers.

Said Boca Raton's Jeff Hoffman, who tries to bring his daughter, Fara, 17, to the monthly bowling: "I love my daughter and I love being with her, but you need a break every now and then. The kids that help out are like angels and Fara gets to interact with kids her own age. It's a win-win situation."

For more information about the Friendship Circle, call (954) 970-9551 or e-mail floridafriendshipcircle@gmail.com.

—Rick Adelman