

Friendship Circle helps special-needs youngsters

By Phyllis Steinberg
STAFF WRITER

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

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

The free program started four years ago in Broward and South Palm Beach counties and currently has 60 special-needs families. The children's needs range from autism to cerebral palsy to Down syndrome, as well as 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 also have 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," Biston said. "There is a void in the community for these families, and the circle reaches the child with special needs in various different ways."

Biston said the most popular program offered by the Friendship Circle is 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 Friendship Circle also has a monthly bowling league that takes place at Boca Bowl and serves ages 4 to 18.

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

"We have guest speakers who demonstrate activities geared to special-needs families," Biston said. "We have yoga, karate and sometimes even cooking lessons."

Yehudis Cattan, of Boca Raton, is a member of the Friendship Circle. She and her husband, Aaron, and special-needs son, 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," she 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.

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

For more information, call 954-970-9551.