

Never too late to learn

Florence Melton Mini-School takes a pluralistic approach to adult ed

By HILARY J. LARSON

Lois Gottlieb of Yonkers is well-educated by any standard. In her 80s, the retired hospital administrator is a lifelong learner and holds a college degree, rare for a woman of her generation.

Yet Gottlieb always felt the lack of a formal Jewish education.

"When I grew up, girls didn't study for bat mitzvahs," she said, noting that she is a longtime synagogue member, first at Lincoln Park Jewish Center in Yonkers and now near her second home in the Catskills.

Gottlieb enrolled at the Florence Melton Mini-School of Westchester, she explained, "because I want to know who I am."

After two years of intensive weekly classes that covered classic Jewish texts, thorny ethical debates and the diverse Jewish experience throughout history, Gottlieb has a stronger relationship to her Jewish heritage.

"I learned so much about Jewish history I didn't know," she reflected. "Honestly, it makes you prouder than you perhaps ought to be."

Gottlieb may have the distinction of be-



Members of the graduating class of the Florence Melton Mini-School of Westchester with two of their teachers, Orthodox Rabbi Adam Starr, center left, and Conservative Rabbi Ryan Dulkan.

ing Melton's oldest student, cherished by classmates for her historical perspective, but her passion for learning is typical.

The Westchester Mini-School, part of a worldwide network of schools, aims to go beyond the typical adult-education short course by offering a comprehensive, in-

depth two-year Jewish educational immersion program specifically designed for adult learners.

Melton calls itself "the largest pluralistic adult Jewish education network in the world." The first school opened 20 years ago due to the efforts of American Jewish community activist Florence Zacks Melton, who envisioned a program of rigor and diversity and made her vision a reality in partnership with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where the school is headquartered.

There are now 62 mini-schools in 60 cities throughout the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia. Nearly 6,000 students attend weekly classes.

The Florence Melton Mini-School of Westchester was founded several years ago by a group that included Rabbi Neal Zuckerman of Temple Israel Center of White Plains and Elliot Spiegel, headmaster of the Solomon Schechter School of Westchester, whose Hartsdale campus serves as the location for Melton's evening classes. Sensing a need in the community, the group traveled to Melton's U.S. headquarters in Chicago to learn about Melton's intensive, committed approach to adult education.

Their labor bears fruit this month when Melton graduates its second Westchester class.

Twenty-two students, most of them women and "most empty-nesters," according to Director Nina Luban of New Rochelle, will celebrate the culmination of their studies; nearly 100 are currently enrolled overall.

The Melton academic philosophy blends Jewish rigor, determined plurality and a mature approach; it bears little resemblance to bar mitzvah preparation.

"The thing that's really distinctive about Melton is that the curriculum was designed by not only top experts in Judaism, but also top experts in adult education," said Luban, who holds a law degree in addition to a master's in education.

"We like to say, 'Give us two hours a week

and we'll give you 5,000 years of history,' " she added.

That may be only a slight exaggeration.

The Melton curriculum is split into two concurrent yearlong courses during each of the two years. First-year students spend 30 classes each in "Rhythms of Jewish Living," which examines ideas and texts central to the recurring Jewish rituals, and "Purposes of Jewish Living," which probes essential Jewish theological concepts in the Bible, Talmud and other sacred texts.

The second year is split between "Ethics of Jewish Living," in which students explore topics such as life, death, justice and sexuality from a variety of Jewish perspectives, and "Dramas of Jewish Living Throughout the Ages," a historical look at the Jewish experience that features primary source texts.

As classic as the subject matter sounds, Melton's pluralistic approach strikes some as refreshing in a world where the Jewish denominations are increasingly segregated.

The four current Melton teachers — Rabbi Rachel Aranoff (Zuckerman's wife), Cantor Ellen Dreskin, Rabbi Adam Starr and Rabbi Ryan Dulkan — collectively represent all three major movements: Orthodox, Conservative and Reform. Selected texts come from a variety of perspectives, from Chasidism to secular liberalism.

As do Melton's students.

This year's graduates include a secular research scientist, a yeshiva graduate, a Hebrew school teacher and a psychologist.

While some students are initially nervous about a teacher from the opposite end of the religious spectrum, they typically come to enjoy the benefit of diverse backgrounds, Luban said.

"If you can tell what religious denomination the teaching comes from, we're not teaching it right," she added.

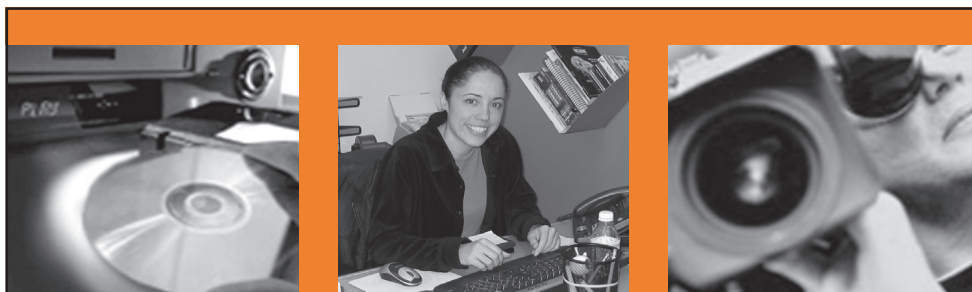
Judging from the enthusiastic response, Melton is teaching something right.

The Westchester Mini-School has begun offering its own shorter, 10-week "graduate" classes in response to demand from those who completed the regular curriculum but want to continue learning. The topics for these classes vary depending on student interest; one recent course focused on Jewish prayers from a literary standpoint.

"Melton is the highlight of my week," said Judith Retblatt of Riverdale, who enrolled at the school after retiring from the New York City Board of Education.

Never having received any Jewish education, Retblatt reveled in poring over Jewish texts, tasting Hebrew and participating in lively class discussions.

"The camaraderie of the class is really special; I learn so much from the other students as well as the teachers," said Retblatt, who graduates this month. "And now that I've started, there's so much more I want to learn."



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