

# News

## Newfoundland congregation marks 10 years

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ATLANTIC CORRESPONDENT

A decade ago, a group of Jewish people in Newfoundland established an egalitarian, religious and social organization to serve St. John's and the surrounding area.

The 20 founding members of Jewish Community Havura of Newfoundland and Labrador has swelled to more than 40 participants in an every-other-Friday night Shabbat service followed by a vegetarian/dairy potluck dinner. There are also services for High Holidays and festivals, Purim and Chanukah celebrations and an annual summer picnic plus myriad general community activities generated by Havura.

The inclusive community encompasses a range of Jews, some strictly kosher, others secular, but all with the mantra of "inclusivity and support, warmth and welcoming," says Nancy Bennett, an original member and the president of the community through its first four years.

The first steering committee meeting was held in April 2006, the constitution approved that July and High Holiday services held in fall 2006.

"We borrowed a Torah from a Montreal shul, and prepared a portable Ark in time for the holidays," Bennett recalls. "After borrowing and returning for two years, we purchased our own Torah and Torah cover in 2008."

Havura meets in people's homes but rents space for holiday and Saturday services when a bar or bat mitzvah might be scheduled.

There is no rabbi in the congregation but



The Havura Community of Newfoundland and Labrador celebrates Tashlich left, and Eli Brown at his bar mitzvah with bar mitzvah teacher and service leader Elizabeth Loder.

a ritual committee designs the service with members volunteering to lead, read Torah and present a dvar Torah. Bennett notes the Friday evening service is 75 per cent in Hebrew with lots of singing, "a positive feeling and very joyous."

With close to 20 youngsters in the house – membership runs from age 0 to 80 – Bennett says a special children's service is held every couple of months. "[It is] a bit shorter with lots of singing and clapping that kids would enjoy. Many come back for our regular services."

Bennett lists a wide variety of community involvements, from multicultural programs and symposiums on building understanding and eliminating poverty, to presentation of music and drama. Havura has provided speakers on Judaism and Jewish holidays to area churches, schools and organizations, participated in Gay Pride Week, contributed to the St. John's Syrian refugee effort, and held a Holocaust memorial service in 2014 where an overflow crowd of more than 1,000 in a hotel ballroom heard survivor Philip Riteman of Halifax (and a former Newfoundlander)

speak.

From 1909 until 2006, Beth El Synagogue was the only St. John's congregation, originally Orthodox but now egalitarian Conservative. In 2006, when some members requested slightly changed services or separate services in the same building and were refused, Havura began.

Jonathan Richler, a nephew of Mordecai Richler, has been Havura president for the last six years. A daily evening radio talk show host on Newfoundland's most popular station, VOCM, Richler also runs a deli with Jewish cuisine and sits on several community boards.

"Our congregation's strengths are visibility (in the general community) and inclusivity. We have a strong collaboration with the Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh communities and foster working relationships, to combat things like poverty, that are unseen in any other province in Canada. We hold multi-faith symposiums and dialogues on a regular basis. I think, in Newfoundland, we have a different perspective of life. We have time for contemplation and co-operation. We truly edu-

cate and foster a community."

Richler was born in Newfoundland 44 years ago, lived in Montreal for 13 years after moving there at 18, and was later in Toronto for three years working in Jewish community life before returning to his home province a decade ago.

When asked if he has his uncle's writing talent, he said, "I write for work, not creatively. I have the Richler sense of humour, though."

He stressed Newfoundlanders are more concerned with what you're about rather than who you are. "They know our [Jewish] people as community leaders."

He envisions Havura continuing to grow. "We commit, have fun, teach our kids, have community events, develop programs with other community groups. There is certainly a heightened awareness of who we are and what we do."

"We are rich with people with a community interest. We have tremendous perspective in our lives and are surrounded by youth. Havura is the group that is organized, recognized and active. We are the future in this community." ■

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