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PhotoByLevi

Deborah Halberstam, far right, looks on during the ribbon cutting ceremony of the Jewish Children's Museum, Dec. 7 in Brooklyn.

ARTS & CULTURE

In area that once saw race riots, kids museum teaches tolerance

By E. B. Solomont

NEW YORK, Dec. 13 (JTA) — She already had crawled through a life-sized challah, puttied on a mini-golf course and shopped in a mock-kosher supermarket.

Now Channah Daphna, 12, was ready to move on to the next activity at the new, interactive Jewish Children's Museum in Brooklyn's Crown Heights section. But her young sister was not, and had to be pulled away from a pegboard after what she clearly believed were far too few minutes of play.

The highly-anticipated museum opened Dec. 7 with a ribbon-cutting ceremony that attracted several marquis political personalities, including Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.), New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

It also attracted Gilead Ingver, 11, who was more interested in the museum's interactive exhibits than in the big-name politicians. Ingver summed up his experience at the museum with a word heard frequently from his young peers throughout the evening: "Cool."

The children's museum is located in a seven-story, 50,000-square foot building that includes the exhibits, community space and executive offices. It represents the effort of Tzivos Hashem, Chabad-Lubavitch's youth organization, to create a headquarters for educating Jewish and non-Jewish children about both Judaism and tolerance.

Located in Crown Heights, where black-Jewish tensions erupted in riots in 1991, the museum is a statement against the violence that roiled the area and has had

lasting repercussions.

“For everything you know” about Judaism, “there are some kids who don’t, and you are introducing them to a whole new world of other people’s traditions,” said Gilead, a student at Brooklyn’s Yeshiva of Flatbush. “And that’s cool.”

Among those kids was Talia Calero, 10, a student at the Evangel Christian School. She gazed upward at the “stars” that were part of an exhibit dedicated to the Sukkot holiday, which she had never heard of before.

She was on more familiar ground, though, in the hallway exhibit explaining creation.

“Jews have the Torah and we have the bible,” she said. Both teach that “on different days, different stuff was made.”

The \$30 million museum facility was designed by the architecture firm Gwathmey Siegel & Associates, which also worked on projects at the Guggenheim Museum, Columbia Presbyterian Hospital and the New York Public Library.

Whether it was the huge photo mosaic outside the museum or a talking tree on the third floor, kids elbowed their way into each nook and cranny to get a first peek at the museum before it officially opens to the public Dec. 23. Eventually the museum plans to include 80 exhibits.

The museum is dedicated to Ari Halberstam, who was killed in 1994 at age 16 by a Lebanese gunman on the Brooklyn Bridge. His mother and Gilead’s stepmother, Devorah Halberstam, is the museum’s director of foundation and government services.

The museum’s interactive style is popular in secular children’s museums around the country. While the Jewish museum is emulating them, it’s also charting new territory with its religious content.

There are over 250 secular children’s museums in the United States, according to a spokeswoman from the Association of Children’s Museums, who pointed out a handful of racially and ethnically themed exhibits in recent years.

The project is the largest among a group of smaller Jewish museums — many within Jewish community centers — that have been quietly running for the past decade.

“Children go to science museums to reinforce science learning, art museums to learn art studies, but they don’t have many places for the informal reinforcement of Jewish learning,” said Barbara Flexner, director of the Sophie Hirsch Srochi Jewish Discovery Museum in Atlanta.

Citing 10,000 visitors to her small museum each year, Flexner said she anticipated growth in children’s Jewish museums.

Sharon Marsten-McKenna, director of My Jewish Discovery Place Children’s Museum in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. — an offshoot of the Los Angeles-based Zimmer Children’s Museum, which is regarded as the first Jewish children’s museum — said Jewish museums should follow successful secular models to appeal to the broadest possible audience.

"If you construct your museums in the interactive way successful museums do, you can have a museum with Judaic content but that is attractive to any child and parent, and you can spread the word that we are all the same, even though we have our differences," she said.

Matthew Ingver, 16, Devorah Halberstam's older stepson, said he thought the museum in Brooklyn would appeal to Jewish and non-Jewish audiences.

"In the end, both come out with an understanding of Jewish religion and traditions," he said. "The Jewish kids know the traditions better and the non-Jewish people can catch up and learn the basics."

Channah, the young girl who had to pull her sister away from an exhibit, said she appreciated meeting other kids from different backgrounds.

"You learn about your beliefs at a museum in general, but here you also see other people and get to socialize and be together," she said, dressed in a pink skirt that hung past her knees in compliance with the Orthodox rules of modesty.

LeiAnna Frazier, 11, a student at Bayridge Christian Academy, heard a message exhibited not in the play space but at the opening ceremony.

As she turned over a mock challah roll from the kosher supermarket, she noted, "Jews are like one family. Everyone came to talk about the kid Ari. That's cool how you back everyone up. With hardship, you stick together."

Asked if she would come back even though she is not Jewish, she said she would.

"I feel comfortable here," she said.

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