

Kneseth Israel Nursery School is lifeblood of Annapolis' small Jewish community

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In the back hallway of a massive and elegant synagogue in the heart of Annapolis sits a preschool with 36 children. From the outside, one might not recognize the school as anything special. It's just a Jewish preschool. But walk inside the double doors, and the school comes alive — a lifeblood of a Jewish community that is small, but still thriving in this city by the water.

Meet Jerri Shafran, director of Kneseth Israel Nursery School. A sweet, petite woman with dynamite direction and a passion for what she does. As she talks about K.I., her eyes light up; she is proud of her students and her school.

In one classroom, children sing “Itsy Bitsy Spider” in Hebrew. In another room, children are learning the blessings over their snacks.

The school has been around for 50 years and has served around 900 students during that time. Not all of the students are Jewish, Shafran said. Many of the teachers aren't either, but the values are Jewish, and the school moves to the Jewish calendar.

“Many students come here who aren't Jewish, but they come because of our reputation for offering an excellent education,” Shafran said.

Shafran noted that students learn about secular and Jewish holidays and that a handful of the children each year continue on to the Aleph Bet Jewish Day School, which is housed in an adjoining building. All K.I. Nursery School families get a free membership to the Kneseth Israel synagogue in which the program is housed.

The kids do Jewish yoga (yoga to the Hebrew letters). The rabbi comes and blows the shofar for Rosh Hashanah.

The students typically start at 2 years old and continue on with K.I. until the age of 5. The mayor of Annapolis, Josh Cohen, sends his daughter there. So does a local alderman.

On a sunny day in April, the students could be found on the playground — a new, state-of-the-art playground with a twisty slide and monkey bars. The children were smiling, laughing and happy to be at the school.

That happiness would not surprise the parents, many of whom exude the same passion for the institution as Shafran.

Take Rachel Villareal, whose daughter, Alyssa, attended K.I. from January 2010 to May 2012 and whose daughter, Julie, is currently enrolled. Villareal said her children have had “a wonderful experience.”

“They were welcoming to Alyssa. ... She was well prepared for entering kindergarten, which is a reflection of the school and teacher. The staff at K.I. is very friendly, always available to discuss anything relating to your children,” she said, noting that she is intermarried and that the school — and the congregation — have readily welcomed her family.

Jennifer Finn described K.I. as “the warmest environment.” She told the JT that Annapolis has a small Jewish community, and K.I. stands out as a shining star within it.

“I think it is a combination of the attributes of the program and also that the students and families are able to connect because of its smaller size,” said Finn. “I also think many of the traditions and rituals that are practiced in the school or through the congregation more generally lend themselves to a sense of family and community. As a mom who is always wondering if I've made the right decision, this one feels great.”