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METROWEST

A Catskills weekend binds strangers around a love of Jewish learning

by Johanna Ginsberg
 NJJN Staff Writer

For the hundreds of people who gathered for the weekend at Kutsher's Country Club in Monticello, NY, the hardest choice some afternoons was whether to focus on the arts, politics, theology, or literature.

"I got to do all different kinds of things I like in a Jewish way, from yoga to shadow puppetry," said Lisa Pachman Schlesinger of Caldwell, one of 65 New Jerseyans who participated in LimmudNY Jan. 12-16.

"I heard teens speak about their relationship between themselves and Arabs, I watched a movie about a gay teen coming out, I heard scholars speak about death and dying. Amazing people in their fields are all giving us a gift. The hardest thing for me here was how to choose among three great things all at once."

Now in its second year, LimmudNY is a nondenominational four-day weekend of workshops, lectures, performances, prayer, and study. It is based on the 25-year-old Limmud, established in Great Britain. Since that first conference, Limmud has spun off satellites around the world including Canada, Israel, and Australia.

The volunteer-led LimmudNY is funded by UJA-Federation of New York and Bikurim: An Incubator for New Jersey Ideas in an effort, say organizers, to create a community of learners "where we are fed by connecting with and learning from each other."

If the presentations by major scholars and activists made the weekend intellectually exhilarating, the surroundings offered something of a time machine trip back to the heyday of the Catskills resorts. "I am probably the one person who has liked the accommodations," said John Feinberg of Montclair, who found out about the conference through his involvement with the Jewish environmental group Hazon. Hazon's founder, Nigel Savage, originally from England, is one of six volunteers who brought Limmud to the United States. "My grandparents did this. It's like living part of the past I never got to do, and now I feel I've gotten the chance to see it," said Feinberg.

Many of the presenters also participated, including Talmud scholar and Jewish Theological Seminary professor Judith Hauptman, who called herself a "junkie for Jewish learning." Another presenter-participant was Galeet Dardashti, lead singer for the group Divahn and part-time cantor at Congregation Shomrei Emunah in Montclair.

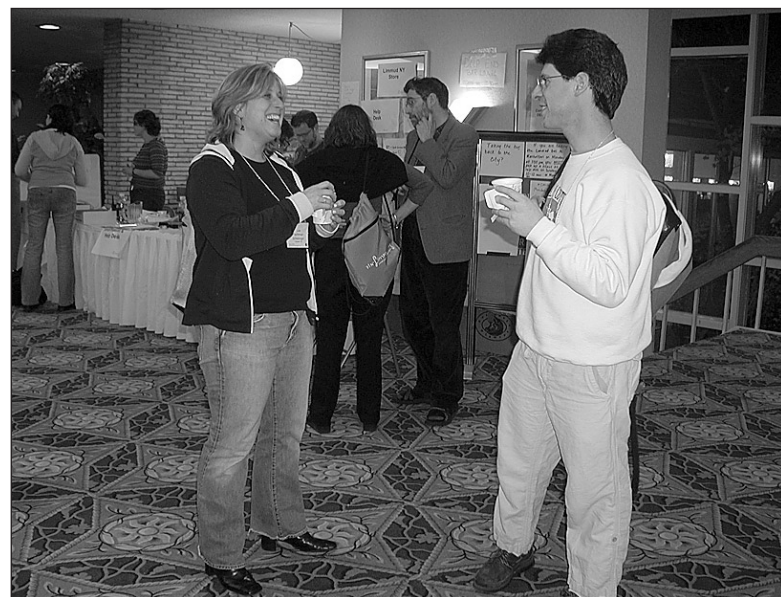
Many of the participants were also volunteers. Feinberg led a Shabbat hike — one of the few outdoor activities, in a downpour that attracted about 15 other hardy folks — and worked on the organization's Web site. He embraced the volunteer nature of

the weekend. "If you just show up, you don't feel as connected. If I hadn't been able to contribute, I would have felt like a tourist here," he said.

Feinberg found himself one evening challenged to an impromptu game of Scrabble by participant and presenter Ruth Messinger, the former Manhattan Borough president and current head of American Jewish World Service.

needed to be upgraded, especially for those 10 and over. "We didn't nail it yet, but the kids were really happy this year," she said.

Similarly, for some with difficulty walking, traversing Kutsher's winding hallways every 90 minutes to get from session to session proved an exhausting challenge. Indeed, some people with canes simply gave up and retreated to their rooms to watch a football game.



John Feinberg of Montclair and Lisa Pachman Schlesinger of Caldwell have a discussion in the lobby at Kutsher's Country Club in Monticello, NY, during the second annual LimmudNY conference, a four-day celebration of Jewish study, prayer, and performance that took place Jan. 12-16. Photo by Johanna Ginsberg

While he said he enjoyed the diversity of the program, which included presenters from all streams of Judaism, a fellow New Jerseyan, Ron Weitzman of Florham Park, suggested LimmudNY reflected a narrow range of political opinion.

Weitzman did say he enjoyed the "eclectic mix of people and the challenge to consider what kind of Jews we are," but he also said the conference was "infiltrated by the Upper West Side" perspective with regard to politics.

"People here are really comfortable in their beliefs and opinions, and there was no effort to challenge them," said Weitzman, a physician who works for a pharmaceutical company. "I understand the vast majority of Jews are against the Iraq War, but it doesn't seem like they invited anyone at the other end of the spectrum — people like [former White House spokesman] Ari Fleischer. Part of a healthy discussion is bringing in opposing viewpoints. These seemed to be absent." Still, he said, he would consider returning next year.

The weekend included a camp for children, organized in part through the efforts of Montclair resident Penny Arons, who sat on the children's programming team. Arons acknowledged the suggestions of parents that while the camp represented an improvement over the first Limmud NY, the children's programming still

Most New Jerseyans attending found out about the conference by word of mouth. That is by design, according to board of directors president Karen Radkowsky. "LimmudNY is funded in large part by UJA-Federation of New York, and our advertising and marketing is done in the UJA catchment area. But there are New Jerseyites who work or go to school in the catchment area."

Wherever they came from, people expressed amazement at the lineup of presenters, the quality of the discussions, and the connections they forged with other participants. Many said they would be back next year. Among these was Karen Alexander of Metuchen.

"I chose some sessions specifically because they relate to the work I do," said Alexander, director of elder care for United Jewish Communities of MetroWest NJ. "There were resources I just could not get back home. And it offered the opportunity to interact with people around specific topics. When do you have time and space and six other people standing around interested in topics like end-of-life issues, stem-cell research, and creating elder rituals?"

Her husband, Fred Eines was so enthralled, he called it "an annual Camelot."

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