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# The Jewish Week

SERVING THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF GREATER NEW YORK

(01/19/2007)

## Learning Across Borders

*Whether newborn or senior, Orthodox or "Just Jewish," exploring philanthropy or Indian Jewry, the Limmud conference had something for everyone.*

Carolyn Slutsky - Staff Writer

Catskill, N.Y. — Walking out of a screening of a film about a Jewish man with developmental disabilities whose neighbors rallied around him financially and emotionally to protect his future, a young woman turned to her friend and commented, "I feel like my life just changed."



"The Collector of Bedford Street," tells the story of Larry Selman, 64, who lives in Greenwich Village with his pets and who has collected thousands of dollars for charity. Realizing that it would be increasingly difficult for Selman, who has no living family, to take care of himself, his neighbors donated money for a UJA-Federation of New York community trust fund ensuring his needs are met, providing a model for how Jewish communities could work to take care of their members in need.

The film was one in a series called "In God's Image: You, Me and Everyone We Know," screened at the third annual Limmud NY conference held last weekend in the Catskills. The series hoped to inspire those who viewed the films if not to change their lives then to at least pay closer attention to issues of inclusion in the Jewish community, to how Jews who do not fit the traditional mold can be appreciated, welcomed and understood.

"We have not made it physically, emotionally or spiritually possible for everyone to be here, and that's not just a problem for the people not there, but a problem for everyone," said Judith Helfand, a filmmaker who curated the series at Limmud. "There are families and individuals who are part of our community that don't feel comfortable coming to shul, don't have place at table and have a really difficult time being part of the community."

The audience who viewed "The Collector" was duly moved. One man, who identified himself as a doctor, told Selman that after seeing how he had reached out to his community, built friendships and raised money, "I don't see your disability but your ability. As doctors, we see what's wrong, but you show us what's right."

Though the film series was a new centerpiece of the conference, beyond the screen Limmud had something for everyone. Founded in England and replicated in other parts of the Jewish world, Limmud aims to bring together Jews across many spectrums to learn, chat and share ideas. Limmud NY drew more than 800 participants to this year's retreat. Rather than hold the event in New York City where people could simply parachute in and out, the organizers chose to retreat to the Friar Tuck Inn here so that people could be fully engaged throughout the weekend.

"We're not a place that serves other people," said Abigail Dauber

Sterne, Limmud's director and one of two paid staff members. "People serve themselves."

The open, questioning spirit of the weekend was embodied in the range of choices in sessions and discussions. During an hour-and-15-minute window on Sunday, people could choose among talks dealing with "Jewish Calcutta through Music and Memory," "The Face of 21st Century Philanthropy," "The Uses (and Misuses) of Humor in Jewish Tradition" and "Burning the Candle at Both Ends: The Pressing Need to Reduce Dependence on Foreign Energy Sources" among others. Workshops were taught by volunteers, who numbered close to 100, and who also staffed the welcome desk, gave directions and coordinated the program.

At the Friar Tuck, decorated as a faux British hunting lodge, a cherub in the fountain lobby temporarily wore a yarmulke and sessions were held in ballrooms, bedrooms and everywhere in between. During one popular talk on the resurgence of Yiddish, people sat in a hotel room with the bed removed, stretching out across the floor and sitting in the door-less closet, their backs to the wall.

For many, the chance to gather with a large group of interdenominational, intergenerational Jews and learn together was the best feature of the weekend.

Daniel Simon, 26, said his main connection to Judaism is through environmental activism, and that he found plenty of people and sessions at Limmud that shared his interests.

"There's a lot of crossover, a lot of cross-pollination," he said of the weekend. "As somebody who works in a non-mainstream field, it's always good to see people with great progressive ideas and how they're getting their voices heard."

Marianna Gersch, who said she is "60-plus" was attending her second Limmud with her daughter, and said that the conference gave her the chance to explore aspects of Jewish life that she could not probe at home.

"All these people come from different backgrounds and styles of learning," she said, marveling at the dining room full of children racing around and hiding behind drapes, adults filling their plates and engaging in conversation, people meeting for the first time and becoming friends. Though Gersch belongs to the Conservative Town and Village synagogue in Manhattan, at Limmud she sampled a Sephardic service as well as a traditional minyan with a mechitza.

"Limmud is open and nonjudgmental," said Dauber Sterne, who met her husband at Limmud two years ago when both stayed at the end of the conference to clean up. "You come and do your thing and do what you want, [whether it's] ecstatic renewal or Orthodox."

In a survey taken after last year's Limmud, 36 percent of participants identified as "Just Jewish" or "Other," pointing toward a trend in the community of many people declining to affiliate with a particular branch of Judaism.

Dasee Berkowitz, one of the co-chairs, said rather than try to label, people are happier just to engage with one another, consider new ideas and establish a tradition of Jewish retreat and learning.

"People go back to their communities and say, 'how can I incorporate what I learned here?'" Berkowitz said.

After hearing that Limmud participants ranged in age from three weeks

to 92 years, Morrie Helitzer, 81, was not surprised.

"What Limmud does is offer the opportunity to stretch and reach," Helitzer said. "And I hope one day to be the 92-year-old." n

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