

## Gateways students, volunteers show their Purim punims

GATEWAYS: ACCESS TO JEWISH EDUCATION  
By Advocate staff



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NEWTON – The princess wanted a frog painted on her face. The doctor, whose favorite Sunday school activity is music, wanted to sing Purim songs. And the astronaut-superhero was pondering which game to play next. They were among the 200-plus attendees at the 2017 Gateways: Access to [Jewish Education's Purim Carnival](#) held at the JCC here March 12. For almost a decade, the Purim Carnival has been both entertainment and refuge for kids with disabilities who participate in Gateways' educational and B'nei Mitzvah programs.

In contrast to the spirited nature of the holiday, the Purim Carnival is a deliberately relaxed event.

"Our goal is to make the carnival completely accessible," says Executive Director [Arlene Remz](#), "so that kids with any disability can

play every game, do every activity and not get overwhelmed. If you're somebody who has trouble making choices or is bothered by loud sounds and wide spaces, this carnival has been designed to be accessible for you.

"Parents have told us that they would never bring their children to a typical Purim Carnival, or any carnival. But this is different," she adds.

Now in its eighth year, the carnival is designed to make disabled students feel comfortable. A big part of this is the Silver Room, a quiet space where students can go first, to structure their day, or visit later, to decompress if things get too hectic.

[Nancy Mager](#), director for Jewish education programs, says students are carefully prepared to encounter a different experience from their usual Sunday school program.

"They know it's not a regular day with their regular teachers," she says. "But they still need structure and that's why we have them make their own schedules as soon as they arrive."

Over the years, the agency has created resources for parents and students to address new situations and to offer coping strategies for them. A popular classroom tool is a series of first person social stories that contextualize and prepare students for a particular circumstance such, as a Purim carnival or a Shabbat dinner.

"There are books that address anxiety about the first day of school or books that explain what happens when you go to the doctor," Mager says. "Our social stories are similar in that they help kids process things that might come up during a holiday. The Purim story prepares our students for what they might see, what they might do or the snacks they might want to try."

Many carnival staffers are teens who participate in the agency's Mitzvah Mensches and Sunday Teen Volunteer programs. Mia Hyman, a board certified behavior analyst, teaches the day school, Prozdor and local high school student volunteers strategies that help them better support the agency's students.



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Prozdor student Alana Gold's interest in teaching and special education drew her to volunteer at Gateways. "I wanted to learn how to interact with kids who have special needs," she says.

Board member Cindy Kaplan works as a parent coach. Her 15-year-old daughter Mia started Gateways in first grade and her son Noah is a teen volunteer.

"I could always tell by her facial expressions that she was happy after she left Gateways," Kaplan says of Mia, who is nonverbal. "What she learned at Gateways was echoed in the house. She would get so excited when we lit the Shabbat candles and recited the blessings. To this day, it's her job to remove the challah cover. She feels involved here and she feels that this is her community."

For the Finkel-Michlin family, Gateways is a shared undertaking. Josh is a teen volunteer and his sister Shira is a Gateways student. Their mother, Sherene Michlin, serves on the board and invites inquiries from anyone who thinks there may be a place for his or her child at the agency.

"A lot of people think that someone has to be severely learning disabled to come here, but that is not the case," Michlin says. "Jewish education is so important to us and Shira didn't have a day school or synagogue option. Nancy [Mager] came to observe her and determined that Gateways could serve my daughter, and it's been an amazing experience for her. She's in a class with her peers."

"I wasn't initially sure if this was my daughter's community, but it was," Michlin says. "This is a place for kids of all abilities."



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