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Art of fund raising for a good cause

By Casey Lyons / Correspondent

Friday, February 27, 2004

Local benefit show and concert helps victims of violence in Israel

For the past three years, things in Israel have alternately worsened and improved. Beneath all the political maneuvering, the questions of right and wrong, should and should not, there are real people suffering from the consequences of ideas and politics larger than themselves.

For the members of greater Boston's Jewish communities, it was not a question of whether or not to help, it was a question of determining the best ways to raise relief aid and spread it effectively.

Responding to a flood of aid requests from Israel, Boston's Jewish communities have answered in kind, making large donations to Americans for Red Mogen David in Israel - the equivalent of the Red Cross. However, as violence in Israel has continued, so have requests for relief funding. Something else had to be done.

Using a network of friends, several individuals in the Boston area were turned on to a group in New Jersey that organized fund-raising concerts, according to an e-mail from Aron Futer, a Newton resident.

"There were two important elements in their activity," he said. "First, almost no expenses or overhead ... Second, [that money be] delivered directly to victims' families in Israel."

In the fall of last year, the wheels were set in motion. Around the same time, the organizers learned of an activity sponsored by the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston.

The CJP was planning to invite artists from Haifa, a port city in the northwestern corner of Israel, to exhibit their work in Boston, Futer said. Seeking to combine music and art at one unified event, the organizers of the two events decided to coordinate their events.

Last Sunday, at the Temple Bnai Moshe in Brighton, through the efforts of various individuals and six Jewish and Russian-Jewish organizations, the months of planning came to fruition.

More than 30 artists, from Israel, Boston and other parts of the world, gathered at the Temple to exhibit their work. In an event that looked like a combination between a fine arts museum and a flea market, hundreds of people circulated, took in the sites and made purchases.

Themes and colors varied as widely as the mediums used. Photography, abstract and caricature paintings, needlepoint, sculptures and leather crafts, just a few examples of the artists' work, were spread about the room. Everything was for sale, and 25 percent of art sale proceeds were donated to Israeli victims.

Fifteen musicians then separately took the stage in the synagogue and played "bard songs" to a full house.

Bard music is a special type of Russian music, more akin to art, in which a person picks a theme, and writes the lyrics and music, said Futer. It is best described as Russian poetry sung to music; the emphasis is on the words. Bard music began in communist Russia and proliferated not by musicians in recording studios, but by people feeling the need to express themselves, by people who felt something so deeply it could not be internalized.

All of the proceeds from the concert went directly to victims' families.

Anna Grinberg, one of the performers, has family in Israel, and through her visits and contacts, she built a network of people who have fallen victim to violence, said Futer. Much of the money is dispersed throughout this personal network and goes directly to the people who need it most. Such a method speeds relief directly to victims who need it most with no intermediate stops.

Futer was surprised with the turnout on Sunday. Based on the results of similar productions held in New Jersey, organizers expected 300 to 500 people to turnout for the event. In all, Futer estimates attendance of nearly 700 individuals, something he attributes to the dual nature of the evening.

"[The combination] really helped," he wrote. "Some people came for the concert but visited the art show as well. And there were others who [came] for the art show but stayed for the concert also."

Those in attendance went away feeling good because they participated in something meaningful to them, Futer said. The event was a way to tangibly connect two different sides of the world.

"A lot of people in Boston - not only the Jewish community - feel compassion because Israel is in a terrible situation," Futer said. "They want to help be a part of [the relief] and let people [in Israel] know they are not alone in the world, that someone cares and wants to help."

It is important for people experiencing daily hardships to know they are connected to something, Futer continued. The symbolic nature of the donations is also significant; continuation is a very important point thing, he said.