

Newark playground an 'outgrowth of *hesed*'

Jewish organizations help plan and fund inner-city school project

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What was once a barren blacktop schoolyard in Newark is now a brand-new colorful play area financed in large part by the contributions of agencies and individuals in the Greater MetroWest Jewish community.

The playground at the inner-city Sussex Avenue Renew School was officially opened on Nov. 16.

The prime mover in the project was Newark's 108-year-old Congregation Ahavas Sholom, which put together a public and private consortium that included the Green Acres Program of the state's Department of Environmental Protection, private donors, and 15 foundations, including the Healthcare Foundation of NJ.

The overall cost of the project — including design, environmental investigation, and project management — totaled "about \$1,000,000," according to the Trust for Public Land, based in Morristown, which helps communities with green-space planning, fund-raising, and park design. The Healthcare Foundation gave Ahavas Sholom a \$75,000 grant to help subsidize construction.

The brainchild of the project was congregation president Eric Freedman of Jersey City, who organized its financing and construction. The quarter-acre site has an Astroturf ball field, playground equipment with safety flooring, and a gardening area where students and community members will plant vegetables in the spring.

Speaking at an hour-long dedication and ribbon-cutting ceremony, Freedman said the playground was "an outgrowth of Ahavas Sholom's compassionate pursuit of *tikun olam*, which means 'repair the world,' and *tzedaka*, which means 'social justice.' It's about fairness; it's about embracing children from all communities. If you think about it, it is a pretty simple message. Every child in Newark — Latino, black, white, Muslim, Christian, Jew — should get a chance to play on a playground every bit as good as those of their colleagues in the suburbs."

When he took the podium several minutes later, former Newark mayor Sen. Cory Booker (D-NJ) gently reminded Freedman, "You forgot about *hesed*, man. C'mon. It means goodness and kindness."

Pleased that young people were asked for their input in creating the playground, Booker told the 100 people who gathered in the chilly weather that all of the new and refurbished parks in Newark were "done the right way — from the community up — designed by community, envisioned by community, fought for by community, and realized by community. It was the teachers and staff and, most importantly, the children of this school who designed and helped to construct this playground," he said.

Marci Felsenfeld, program officer at the Healthcare Foundation, said her organization has financed more than \$110 million in health-related projects in Newark and its suburbs from the proceeds of the sale of New-



Darleen Gearhart, principal of the Sussex Avenue Renew School, prepares to cut the ribbon to officially open the school's new playground. Looking on are, from left, Marilyn Gaynor of the My Block, My Family, Our Village Neighborhood Association; Cami Anderson, superintendent of Newark Public Schools; Janette Colon-Jorge, former vice principal of Sussex Avenue Renew School; Congregation Ahavas Sholom's president Eric Freedman and Rabbi Simon Rosenbach; and Scott Dvorak of the Trust for Public Land.

Photos by Robert Wiener



Former Newark mayor Sen. Cory Booker praised the teachers, staff, and children of the school, "who designed and helped to construct this playground."



Congregation Ahavas Sholom's Rabbi Simon Rosenbach, left, his son Ben, center, and acting cantor Fred Grabiner on the playground at Sussex Avenue Renew School a few minutes before the ribbon-cutting ceremony.

ark Beth Israel Medical Center. "We are perfecting the world for the sake of heaven," she said, explaining that educational sessions connecting with the vegetable garden alongside the playground will increase family awareness about healthy eating.

Among others who spoke were Newark Mayor Ras Baraka; State Sen. Teresa Ruiz (D-Dist. 29); Joseph McCallum, a Newark City Council member from the West Ward; school principal Darleen Gearhart, Newark Public Schools superintendent Cami Anderson; and Marilyn Gaynor, an alumna of Sussex Avenue Renew School who now serves as president of the My Block, My Friends, Our Village Neighborhood Association.

Before the assembled dignitaries, teachers, and students assembled to cut the red ribbon and officially open the playground, Ahavas Sholom's Rabbi Simon Rosenbach put the moment into a biblical context.

"In this week's Torah portion, Jacob, who was a real wheeler-dealer, makes a deal with God. He says, 'God, if you give me clothes, if you give me food, if you give me a safe return to my father's house, I'll give you 10 percent of everything I earn.'

"Today we are striking a different deal with God," said Rosenbach. "If God gives us the strength to persevere, with all of your help, we will build more playgrounds in Newark."

Prior to the ceremony, Rabbi Yoav Altman of West Orange told *NJ Jewish News* he attended the ceremony "to show support for the Jewish legacy of Newark. Cooperation between the Jewish community and Newark is always good, and since the Jewish people has such a history and a lot of roots in Newark," projects like the playground are "a great idea."

Rabbi Rosenbach's son Ben said, "The connection of the synagogue to Newark and what we do to help out is wonderful."

Fred Grabiner of Livingston, an Ahavas Sholom member who serves as its cantor, told *NJIN*, "Our synagogue is a part of Newark and has an obligation to do what it can to further our city. We consider that schools, children, and playgrounds are very important for the future."

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Moments after the ribbon was cut, children at Sussex Avenue Renew School frolic on the equipment in their new playground.



Kids gather to join in celebration of the opening of the new Sussex Avenue Renew School playground.