

# Providing Peace

Shivah coordination business helps take the burden off families.



**Marielle Temkin**

Special to the Jewish News

Lossing a loved one is always difficult, and the processes that follow the loss often amplify the difficulty. There is the funeral to consider, the customs that must be obeyed, the family that will come into town and, of course, planning the shivah.

This is where Marci Zeman, 54, of West Bloomfield, comes in. She started her company, ShivaGals, in September 2013 after realizing there was a need for such a service in the community.

"About three years ago, my mom passed away," she explained, "and I was lucky because I have a lot of friends who were able to take charge and help me with the shivah. But, what I found was that there is a difference between age groups — my younger siblings and their spouses didn't really know what to do or where to begin, which was surprising."

During the period following her mother's passing, Zeman conducted research in the community and found there was a need for a shivah-coordinating service. Her slogan, "During a difficult time, have peace of mind," conveys the exact message her company delivers.

"There's a lot of stress during this time," she said, "which is compounded by the rituals that need to be followed and the house that needs to be set up for company and many other tasks that need to happen that people just aren't aware of and don't want to have to worry about during this time."

Zeman's services are tailored to each of her clients — she helps each of her customers with whatever they request. For each family, she sits

down with them to discuss what type of food they want to serve, allowing them to pick from a wide variety of menus and caterers. Zeman explained that she can plan the funeral for the family if they aren't comfortable going to the funeral homes and will run any errands and arrange anything the family needs at a moment's notice.

"The idea behind ShivaGals is to make things as easy and painless as possible. In many cases things will pop up suddenly, which we can take care of, giving the family as much peace of mind we can," she said. Prices vary, depending on what is required.

Currently, Zeman works by herself but is hoping to grow enough to "put the 's' in gals," she laughed.

Her passion for this work is clear, and Zeman explained that being a caretaker has always been a core part of who she is. "I don't think everybody could do this, could have the mental state to take this job on."

The pace of her business has been picking up, she said, mostly through word of mouth and through her connections in the community. "I volunteer at the JCC and at Temple Israel and in my kids' schools, so people in the community know they can count on me." She's also on the board of the sisterhood at Temple Israel and is a past board member.

"I think there's a void in our community now with people who are working two jobs; they're very busy and they just don't have the time to help out their friends. It's not a matter of other people not caring; it's just the reality of society right now. So, if I can help out, I'm happy to do it." □

Learn more about ShivaGals at [www.shivagals.org](http://www.shivagals.org) or by contacting Marci at (248) 721-0215 or [marci@shivagals.org](mailto:marci@shivagals.org).



Marci Zeman



Temple Israel religious school students in Ruth Katsnelson's third-hour Judaics class helped raise money for Blessings in a Backpack.

# Blessings In A Backpack

Temple Israel students learn about hunger through classroom project.

**Stacy Gittleman**

Special to the Jewish News

Even though they are young, students at Temple Israel's religious school can empathize with someone who has an empty stomach.

Educators at the West Bloomfield synagogue's religious school combined that understanding with teaching the mitzvah of giving tzedakah in their lessons this fall to raise \$5,000 in just eight weeks for Blessings in a Backpack, a fledgling program that combats childhood hunger in one of the poorest sections of Detroit.

"Children can understand that when your stomach is grumbling, you don't feel well, and it is very hard to concentrate in school," said Rabbi Ariana Gordon, director of Jewish education and lifelong learning at Temple Israel's Tyner Religious School. The Blessings in a Backpack program teaches children living in insular, suburban settings that there are kids like them just 20 miles away who face hunger on a daily basis.

Sarah Kraft, a social worker from Farmington Hills, is one of four self-titled "Blessing Sisters" volunteers who brought this project to life at Temple Israel. The Blessing Sisters also include Debbie Lederman and Brenda Steuer, both of Bloomfield Hills, and Risa Brickman of West Bloomfield.

Blessings in a Backpack is a project of Project Healthy Community (PHC), a non-profit organization serving the poorest families in Northwest Detroit. Additional partners for Blessing in a Backpack include Hartford Memorial Baptist Church, Meijer and local Detroit grocers.

"At the core of my profession is feeding and caring for hungry kids," Kraft said. "At the core of Judaism is teaching tzedakah. If children are well fed over the weekend, they can come to school on Monday ready to learn and succeed." □

For five weeks this fall, Temple Israel teachers in each grade found relevant texts from the Torah that teach the Jewish obligation to feed the hungry. When the teachers reviewed these texts, and the Blessing Sisters visited the classes and showed them the backpacks that needed to be filled with food, the lesson "went straight to their hearts," Kraft said.

Ninety-five percent of the children in this part of the city qualify for subsidized breakfast and lunch programs during the school week. Come the weekend, many of these children face near-empty pantries and refrigerators at home. That is where the backpack comes to the rescue.

The money raised by Temple Israel will supply 270 children at MacDowell Elementary School with \$2.40 worth of healthy food such as yogurt, tuna, pasta, peanut butter and other items every weekend between January and June. Backpacks are filled every Thursday between noon and 2 p.m. at IPA MacDowell, 4201 W. Outer Drive, Detroit. Volunteers who can pack backpacks are always appreciated. To volunteer, sign up at <http://bit.ly/19ml1gh>.

"The most incredible part of this project is that we are creating a partnership of volunteerism between the suburbs and Detroit," said Karen Sherbin, PHC program coordinator. "Blessings in a Backpack is turning out to be a wonderful, sustainable part of PHC. We are also getting families involved in making healthier eating decisions and preparing better food at home."

According to Sherbin, Blessings in a Backpack can lead to improved test scores, reading skills, positive behavior, and overall health and well-being for the children who receive food to eat over the weekend.

In the long term, Sherbin hopes that Project Healthy Community can bring families together to learn how to cook healthier meals together. □