

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE FOR BAT MITZVAH

By RICHARD DYMOND, Herald Staff Writer • Tue, Jun. 13, 2006

MANATEE - Traditionally in Orthodox Judaism, boys become bar mitzvah upon their 13th birthday, marking their entry into adulthood.

Girls do not.

But in many reform Jewish congregations, including the two-year-old Chavurah Ner Tamid in East Manatee, girls are also enjoying a similar life-cycle event called a bat mitzvah.

For two Chavurah Ner Tamid members - Lynne Belford and Judie Littell - their bat mitzvahs came a little later.

Belford and Littell are both in their 60s.

"It was very, very lovely watching them both be bat mitzvahed," said Rena Morano, religious director for Chavurah Ner Tamid.

Both women said they were inspired to have the service that had bypassed them for decades after meeting Rabbi Barbara Aiello, the rabbinical adviser of Chavurah Ner Tamid.

Aiello helped start Chavurah Ner Tamid.

Aiello will return to Manatee County this month to conduct the bat mitzvah of another Chavurah Ner Tamid member -12-year-old Lakewood Ranch resident Jaclyn Jacobson - on Saturday.

While she is back in Florida, Aiello will also present a program Sunday based on the writings of Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, who recently published "Code of Jewish Ethics."

Aiello's visit also coincides with the second anniversary of Chavurah Ner Tamid.

Belford and Littell credit ethics as part of the reason for having their bat mitzvah late, rather than never.

"I think it has made me become more aware of who I am as a Jewish woman," Belford, 61, said. "I think it helped me become a more receptive person. Before, I would shoot from the hip."

Belford, who lives in Garden Lakes in East Manatee, is retired from the school district of Philadelphia, where she worked for 30 years as a secretary for eight different schools.

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Belford was from a conservative Jewish family, but her life carried her away from religion.

"I was a flower child of the '60s," Belford said.

She married twice, including 38 years to her current husband, Roy.

Five years ago, after she had moved to Manatee County, a friend took Belford to listen to Aiello, who was then the rabbi of Temple Beth El.

"I was impressed with her," Belford said. "I liked that she was accepting of mixed marriages. I took a Hebrew crash course. I considered a bat mitzvah and thought to myself, 'Hey, I can do this!'"

Belford felt deep down that something had been missing from her life.

"I wanted to find out about my religion," Belford said. "I found myself reading from a Torah commentary to find out what it is all about. I discovered I am very impressed with my religion. It teaches people to be good."

For Littell, the experience was less a discovery of something lost, and more revisiting something that was always close.

"I always knew I was Jewish and deep down wanted to find my roots," Littell said. "When my husband, Arthur, and I got married and started a family, there was no question about which religion to raise our sons."

Littell and her husband, Arthur, who died in 2005 after a 10-year battle with Alzheimer's disease, attended a synagogue in Livingston, N.J., and their boys were later bar mitzvahed.

The family was active in temple life, but Littell put her dream of bat mitzvah aside to care for her family.

"It took me until now to realize the dream," Littell said.

Belford called the bat mitzvah training "rigorous."

Starting in October 2004, she and Littell had to learn to read Hebrew directly from the Torah, which is the first five books of Old Testament.

The 10-month bat mitzvah course of study also included reading Jewish history and Jewish thought and philosophy.

Belford and became "phone buddies," calling each other and reading prayers together.

"I was very nervous because the Hebrew in the Torah has no vowel marks or punctuation," Belford said.

Because Chavurah Ner Tamid received its first Torah scroll just a week before their bat mitzvah, the women

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had only one occasion to practice reading directly from the scroll.

"The first time I read, I felt awe," Belford said.

It is different teaching adults from children because adults are coming to it with a wealth of experiences, said Morano, who trained the two women in her capacity as education director and lay service leader. "For kids, everything is theoretical. Judie and Lynne had life experiences that they could relate to everything we studied."

Part of the teaching calls for the bat mitzvah to do good deeds in the community after the service, which the two have done, Morano said.

"Their commitment to their religion was mature and deep," Morano said. "Both of them continue to demonstrate their commitment today to the community as well as to the Chavurah."

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If you go:

What: Rabbi Barbara Aiello will speak on "Getting Good, Being Good, Staying Good: Applying Jewish Ethics to Modern Life."

When: 3 p.m. Sunday

Where: Chavurah Ner Tamid, Lakeside South Clubhouse, 3817 40th Ave. W.

Donation: \$18, includes an Italian dessert buffet

Information: 755-1231