

Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs

Torch Award Application

2003 – 2005

Men's Club of Temple Ner Tamid

Peabody, Massachusetts

Hogan School Dance

Best Mitzvah / Social Action Program

Program Description

The annual Hogan School Dance is a social action program that most certainly has a significant positive impact on a too often overlooked sector of the local community. When this program was started over thirty years ago, the Hogan School was an institution of learning for mentally-challenged adults, affiliated with the local Danvers State Mental Hospital. Our club would host a dance each year for the Hogan School, providing them with well-needed entertainment and socialization. A number of years ago, the state hospital closed, and the Hogan School was significantly scaled back. Year after year, less and less people would come to enjoy themselves at this function. Therefore, in recent years we have reached out to other establishments in the area, including mostly small-scale group homes. In the last two years (the timeframe for the torch award application), we have had approximately 225 guests, which includes the clients (politically correct term) and the associated staff. While only 14 of those guests were actually from the Hogan School this past year, we still use that name for all of our program literature.

What is so great about a dance? In order to answer that question, we need to examine our guests' lives. These individuals are severely mentally and very often physically handicapped. Most of them live in small group homes where their lives are ruled by routine. Their activities are limited, and certainly do not include such things as dancing. Rarely do any of them leave the group home at all. Since these homes have a small number of residents, their social interactions are also very limited. Once a year, we give them a chance to get out of their home, listen to music and dance, and interact with individuals from other homes. This may seem like a small thing to most people, but as far as we know, we are the only organization in our community that provides this service.

All it takes is a few minutes of time volunteering at this event in order to appreciate the impact we have on the community. There is no subtlety. In spite of their disabilities, most of our guests have enormous hearts, typically worn on their sleeve. They are so happy, and often show their appreciation by hugging the volunteers. The staff members who work with these unfortunate people every single day are also very appreciative. In our eyes, they are the real heroes doing a very difficult and often thankless job for which they are grossly underpaid. Year after year, they tell us how unique it is for their clients to be able to get out of their home for a dance. There is a particularly touching anecdote from our 2004 event that we would like to relate. Several volunteers were talking to a staff member, when the staff member pointed to the

dance floor and said, “See those two dancing there?” When we said we did, she told us that they had been boyfriend and girlfriend for something like 15 years, but live in different group homes now. She said that was the first time they had ever danced together.

The following picture, from our 2005 event, gives a general idea of what the event is like.



Program Implementation

This program is relatively simple to implement. Prior to the event, we call all of the group homes in the area and invite them to the dance. The only other thing we need to do prior to the event is to purchase the food. The dance itself begins at 11:30am and ends at 2:30pm. We have a professional D.J. playing the music. We provide a lunch, which consists of sandwiches (tuna, pb&j), potato chips, and ice cream cups for dessert. In addition to helping setup and make sandwiches, the most important role of the volunteers is to interact with our guests, dancing with them, talking with them, and generally making them feel at home. All of this is done in conjunction with our Women’s League, and we also often have volunteers from our USY kids.

Tips for Other Men’s Clubs

There are a few things that we’ve learned over the years that we would like to pass on to any other clubs thinking of running a similar program. First of all, the hall that the dance will be held in must be wheelchair accessible. Second of all, many of the guests have strict dietary requirements that should be taken into consideration. Therefore, we not only make tuna and pb&j sandwiches, but we also make just plain peanut butter sandwiches as well as just plain jelly sandwiches. In addition, some of the guests cannot eat solid food. In past years we have had a blender on hand to liquefy sandwiches. Beginning next

year, we plan on making some mashed potatoes to have available for these guests. Many of the guests also have to seriously watch their sugar intake. Therefore, we serve Crystal Light rather than regular punch. Also, some of them cannot have dairy, so we provide sherbet cups in addition to ice cream cups. We like to have coffee and tea available for the staff members, but we do not put coffee pots out since we don't want our guests to inadvertently burn themselves. Therefore, we keep the hot pots in the kitchen, and serve the staff members ourselves. It is the little things like this that really need to be thought through before hosting this kind of event.

One thing that we would like to improve on is the number of volunteers we get to help. Volunteering at this event is by no means an easy proposition. Seeing some of our guests for the first time can be quite shocking. You can carry on a conversation with most of them, but some are very unfortunately confined to wheelchairs, with moans and gesticulations their only form of communication. It can be emotionally draining. Therefore, it can be very difficult to get people to come out and help. We always seem to have just enough people, however, and those of us that do volunteer leave with a full heart and a new perspective on the problems in our own lives.

Why Do We Deserve an Award?

We are certain that every club that submits an application in this category is doing wonderful and helpful things for their community. So what makes us different? We have identified a sector of our community that, quite frankly, goes unnoticed. Many organizations have programs to feed the hungry, clothe the homeless, or help people with terrible diseases to be able to afford their medications. These are all important and worthy charitable actions. What we are doing, however, is unique, at least in the context of our local community. We learn this from the staff members themselves that attend the event. It is also important to note that it really doesn't cost us much money to run the event. We are also not raising any funds, or collecting any goods. We believe this event embodies the ideal of Jewish tzedakah, in that we are making a personal contribution to those in need. We are giving something much more valuable than money or cans of soup – we are giving ourselves. The description for this torch award category states that a club must have “developed an ongoing program that directly impacts on people.” We can't think of a program that better fits that description than the Hogan School Dance.