



Lisa with her daughter Jackie packing up a Mitzvah

# TELLING our STORY

Teaching Values and Making  
a Difference at the JCC  
*Leonard and Syril Rubin Nursery School*

**W**hat makes a Jewish early childhood education so special? Its ability to be a gateway to lifelong Jewish journeys? The enduring friendships it provides? Or the network of parents it brings together to create meaningful Jewish engagement?

The answer is all of the above. But if you ask Lisa Jesner – a one-time successful transaction attorney who became the ‘Mitzvah Mom’ at the *Leonard and Syril Rubin Nursery School* at the JCC – she’ll tell you there’s a fourth compelling reason: to teach our children how to bring important Jewish values beyond the classroom – something Lisa found the JCC nursery school nurtures in ways that are beyond compare.

“I grew up at this JCC,” Lisa says. “I came here with my dad as a child to run the track and swim, or sit in the café, doing my homework.” So when Lisa, her husband and two daughters moved back to the area, it was clear the JCC would be a center of their lives.

**“Providing a solid Jewish education was a top priority, and while there are a lot of local options, in my opinion, there are none that celebrate Jewish life and identity the way they do at the J.”**

The JCC nursery school provides incredible educational experiences where children not only learn about Jewish life and ritual, but ways to embrace and practice them in exciting, interactive ways, which fit right in with the school's overall experiential learning-based model. Like most kids in a Jewish school, they celebrate Shabbat, collect clothes for the needy and write letters to soldiers in Israel to learn the importance of mitzvahs and doing good deeds.

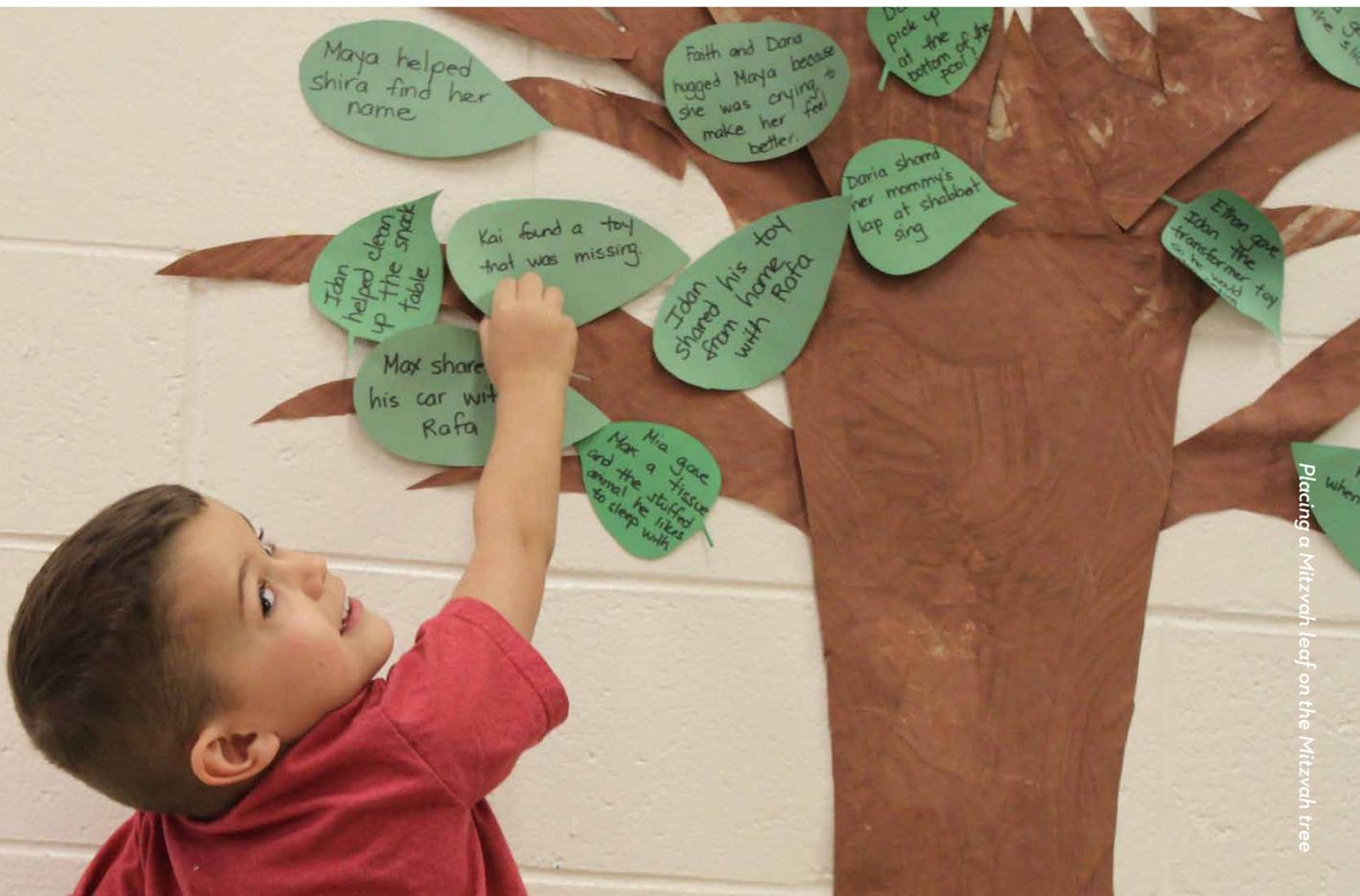
**“The kids here don’t just learn about mitzvahs,” Lisa explains. “They celebrate holidays with seniors and do crafts with young adults with special needs. There is no better way to learn the rewards that come with community service than through action-based activities like these.**

“They learn that they have the power to make a difference. They write personal wishes on paper leaves and tack them to a tree on the classroom wall so they can talk about all the good things they can do to make the world a better place. And when the tree fills up, they see how one good deed can grow into many.”

Another great aspect of the school’s philosophy is to engage parents in the classroom experience. Lisa embraced this notion with a passion, joined the school’s *Mitzvah* committee and in no time, became known as the nursery’s *Mitzvah Mom*.

**Working with the incredibly dedicated teachers, Lisa and the other active Mitzvah Moms planned lessons and experiences that took mitzvah projects to a whole new level. The goal was to plan every project with community-based learning in mind to make sure the children linked important values to their experiences.**

“For example, when Purim was approaching, we decided to hold a costume drive for children who couldn’t afford to buy their own,” Lisa says. “On the surface, it was about doing a good deed, but the real goal was to teach the kids to imagine themselves in other people’s shoes. To create excitement, we asked them to share who they were dressing up as for the holiday and why. But then we talked about how disappointing it would feel not to have a costume and the discussion really made them appreciate how special it would feel to be given a princess dress or superpower costume to wear if they didn’t have one.”



Placing a Mitzvah leaf on the Mitzvah tree



A *mitzvah* program Lisa is particularly proud of is one created as part of Spirit Week at the J, which centers around a toy drive and includes a pep rally in the gym. In the weeks leading up to the event, the kids create a *mitzvah* chain, and every time they do a *mitzvah*, like holding a door for someone, they write what they did on a strip of paper that their teachers add to the chain, which grows and grows. Then, on the day of the rally, each class brings their chain to the gym where they're all strung together.

For the kids, it becomes colorful, living proof of how one good deed builds on the next and how every individual act matters.

**“Group activities like this shape how our children think and who they will become,” Lisa concludes. “I am so grateful to all the JCC teachers who make such lessons a priority and encourage us as parents to be part of the process. These efforts build community and the nursery staff at the JCC understands this at a very core level. They teach children that they can make a difference. It’s so inspiring - I’m sure it’s a lesson that will remain with the children throughout their life”.**

“Helping children to understand and embody important morals and values is a critical component of our philosophy,” says Devin Zukofsky, Director of the Leonard and Syril Ruben Nursery School. “We often talk about *Tikkun Olam*, the Jewish concept for repairing the world, and Lisa was instrumental in bringing this value to life. She brought creative, meaningful social action projects to our school and made them relatable to young children. Now, a new network of *Mitzvah Moms* is carrying on her traditions and introducing new ones that give our kids the chance to show the world their best - and the best of the JCC as well!”

*For more information about The Leonard and Syril Ruben Nursery School, visit [jccotp.org/nursery-school](http://jccotp.org/nursery-school) or call 201.408.1436.*