

Chapter Twelve

The Westchester Jewish Conference

At the turn of 1990's I took a position as director of the Westchester Jewish Conference (WJC,) now known as the Westchester Jewish Council. That agency was the umbrella for almost all of the synagogues and Jewish organizations in Westchester county. There were more than seventy members when I started the position and I was able to add more than fifteen when I retired seven years later. When I took the directorship I made it clear to the board of directors, that as a retired school administrator, I may have the opportunity to serve as an interim administrator in local school districts. I would be able to keep in touch with my secretary during the day and be at the Conference office after school and well into the evenings. Of course I would be available for any meetings held in the evenings.



Because I accepted a meager salary they accepted my conditions.

I enjoyed my work at the WJC very much. I was involved in many diverse activities. I advocated for Israel and the Jewish community with the politicians representing Westchester. I held regular Sunday morning legislative breakfasts which were attended by several congressmen as well as Nita Lowey the congresswoman who represented most of Westchester County. Local politicians also regularly attended.

With the help of volunteers and my sons Jonathan and Benjy, we created a booth at the Clearwater Festival held at Croton Point overlooking the Hudson River. The purpose of the booth was to counter an anti-Israel pro-Palestinian booth that had been at the festival for many years.

I was able to participate in two trips to Israel under the sponsorship of the WJC. My son Benjy was able to accompany me with a group who visited Israel in December of 1990, just before the first Gulf War began. It was great to share the experience with him. On another trip, I was able to create a close relationship with Andy O'Rourke, the Westchester County Executive. He was very helpful to the Conference during his entire term of office. He passed away several years ago and I know that as a Republican he would have been heart broken to see what Donald Trump did to his party.

Special events were held featuring former Israel Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, New York Senator Al D'Amato, the then wife of the infamous Israeli spy Jonathan Pollard, New York Times executive editor, Abe Rosenthal and many other significant personalities. I worked with Holocaust survivors to plan and execute the annual

Holocaust memorial. I attended and led many meetings regarding issues and events that affected the Jewish community.

One of the interesting meetings I led, was with Holocaust survivors who were planning the annual Holocaust memorial program. A highlight of the event was the lighting of the candles commemorating the death of the six million Jews who perished during the Nazi era. Six survivors would light a candle, each for one million slaughtered Jews. The committee would select six survivors, among the many Westchester County survivors who were still living, to light the six candles. As the names were mentioned for the honor of lighting the most prestigious first candle, the conversation went like this:

Committee member: "How about Sarah Schwartz?"

Response: "Oh no, Sarah was only hiding in the forest."

Member: "How about Louie Hersh?"

Response: "Certainly not, Louie was a hidden child."

Member: "How about Sadie Goldman?"

Response: "No, no, no, Sadie was in a convent with the nuns."

Member: "How about Hilda Becker?"

Response: "She can't. She was in the Kinder Transport."

Member: "Then how about Ted Smilov?"

Response: Oh yes! Ted was in Buchenwald. He lost his entire family. He should light the first candle."

I was unaware that among the survivors of the Holocaust there is a hierarchy. First among them are those who endured the concentration camps with numbers tattooed on their arms. All other war time experiences are lower on the survivor totem pole. But to those of us who did not endure the ravages of the Nazis, they are all survivors.

George Mandel represented the Workman's Circle. He was the commemoration chairman and insisted that Yiddish was the "official language" of the Holocaust. Other members of the committee objected to his view. Jack Pollak, who was raised in the Netherlands, said that he never learned Yiddish, did not speak it, nor did his family speak Yiddish. And yet he was sent to concentration camps and his family were all killed. Another member of the group, of Sephardic origin, pointed out that thousands of Sephardic Jews, who spoke Ladino, were murdered. George's orientation was that Yiddish speaking eastern European Jews were heavily victimized by the Holocaust. He seemed to be denying how the Nazi atrocities affected millions of other Jews.

Along with Lester Millman, an active member of the WJC board and a future president, we embarked on a project to reach out to the

Westchester Arab community. There was a significant number of Christian Arabs in Yonkers and a large Muslim mosque in Mount Vernon. We visited these groups and held several joint programs to show our solidarity towards a lasting peace in the Middle East.

We annually published a comprehensive listing of all our member organizations with the aim of showing a community of diversity. Many of our member organizations had opposing views on a variety of Jewish thoughts. The Conference membership was composed of groups ranging from ultra orthodox Hasidim, the Chabad, to very liberal reformed temples. It included right wing organizations who promoted left bank settlements in Israel to left wing groups who opposed settlement growth. But under the banner of the Westchester Jewish Conference they all stood together to counter anti-semitism and fight all kinds of bigotry.

A goal of the Conference was to have the Westchester County Legislature pass a law that would require the many local police departments to report all bias incidents in their jurisdiction. That would allow the county and organizations like the Anti Defamation League to keep track of a rise or fall of bias incidents in Westchester. The WJC spearheaded this initiative and I worked closely with legislator Paul Noto to successfully pass the legislation.

One incident that was reported in the county newspapers was about a high school yearbook caption next to a graduate's photo which was viewed as anti-semitic. The Bronxville newspaper picked up the story and it became an issue because no staff member at Bronxville High School censored the innuendo, the specifics of I have forgotten. But the incident turned into a project by the local clergy to unite, to fight all kinds of racial, religious and gender bias. The

pastor of a local Bronxville church asked me to work with him to hold a county wide inter-religious program centered on combatting bigotry. I was interviewed by several news outlets regarding bigotry in the county. It was an interesting time.

Saul Singer, the WJC president at the time, mentioned to me that he wished his unmarried son would find a nice Jewish girl in Westchester County. He speculated that a singles network was needed. I agreed and told him I would try to start one. It was not hard to find a group of older singles who jumped at the idea. They volunteered to form a singles committee to plan and execute events. I called synagogue executive directors and asked to use their social halls for events. We would pay for any custodial costs and they would be doing a good deed by promoting Jewish matchmaking. The singles network turned out to be serving older Jewish singles, mostly over fifty years of age. It was certainly not for Saul's twentyish son. For almost five years the singles

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Clearinghouse On Bias

Legislature plan would require that police report crimes to county.

JUDITH NAOMI FISH
WESTCHESTER CORRESPONDENT

Are bias crimes increasing in Westchester? Are they clustered in a particular area? Directed at a particular group?

The executive director of the Westchester Jewish Conference wants these questions answered.

Howard Rubin knows that houses of worship have been vandalized and swastikas have been scrawled on walls. But without mandatory reporting of bias incidents by local police departments to a central county clearinghouse, there are no accurate statistics on these occurrences, he says.

Rubin has enlisted support on this issue from Westchester Legislator Paul Noto, the former mayor of Mamaroneck, and fellow Legislator Andrew Donovan have proposed that all police jurisdictions be required to report bias crimes to the Westchester County Department of Public Safety.

The legislation committee will begin hearings on the proposal next month, says Noto, who expects the legislation to move on to the full board by September or October. A majority vote of the 17-member board is needed for passage.

According to Noto, there presently exists a recommendation by the state to report bias crimes to Albany. Some municipal departments comply; some do not.

By mandating the reporting, Noto says, there will be "a central repository of bias crime statistics for Westchester County. [We will] have a database for educational purposes and to assist in enlightening people about the nature of the problem and what to



Paul Noto is spearheading the Legislature plan to create "a central repository of bias crime statistics in Westchester County."

do when it occurs."

Bias crime, as defined by New York State, includes damage to religious premises as well as injury or threat of such to a person because of race, color, religion or national origin.

Noto adds that the county's department of public safety, with its major crimes analysis unit, is appropriate to handle this information.

"Unfortunately," he says, "bias cuts across all ethnic and socio-economic lines." He recalls past incidents of defacements in

cemeteries and swastikas drawn on train stations.

Rubin says his interest in this legislation began "several years ago when I became aware that although other suburban counties, like Nassau and Suffolk [in Long Island], as well as New York City, have mandatory reporting, Westchester does not."

Rubin points out, however, that in Nassau, for example, reporting is somewhat simplified because the county police force operates through local county precincts. Village police departments in Nassau are often small and limited, unlike Westchester, which has large, autonomous municipal forces. Reporting in Westchester, Rubin says, is therefore dependent on each city or village police department's regulations.

White Plains Police Chief James Bradley, whose department does report bias crimes to the county (which then forwards the information to the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services) says the number of incidents in his city is small. White Plains detectives interviewed recalled few incidents, mostly limited to graffiti.

Lt. Robert Magaletti, public information officer for the county department of public safety, found only three incidents logged by the county police this year — two in Greenburgh and one in White Plains. The White Plains incident involved graffiti directed against the African-American community.

Rubin believes these figures are low not only because some incidents may go unreported to the county, but because the victims themselves often do not report these crimes to their municipal police.

Judge Mary Smith of the City Court of Yonkers agrees.

"I'm not aware of bias crimes being re-

ported that often," she says, "but I know they happen. Generally it's graffiti or criminal mischief damage done at night and no one is apprehended. Many of these incidents go unreported because people don't think they can catch the wrongdoer. Others feel the shame of being the victim."

"A county reporting law would be more effective if every citizen and every synagogue or church or other religious institution that experienced criminal mischief would report it to their police department."

The goal of mandatory reporting to the county, says Rubin, is twofold: Identifying the extent of the problem and "making a strong statement that it's unacceptable."

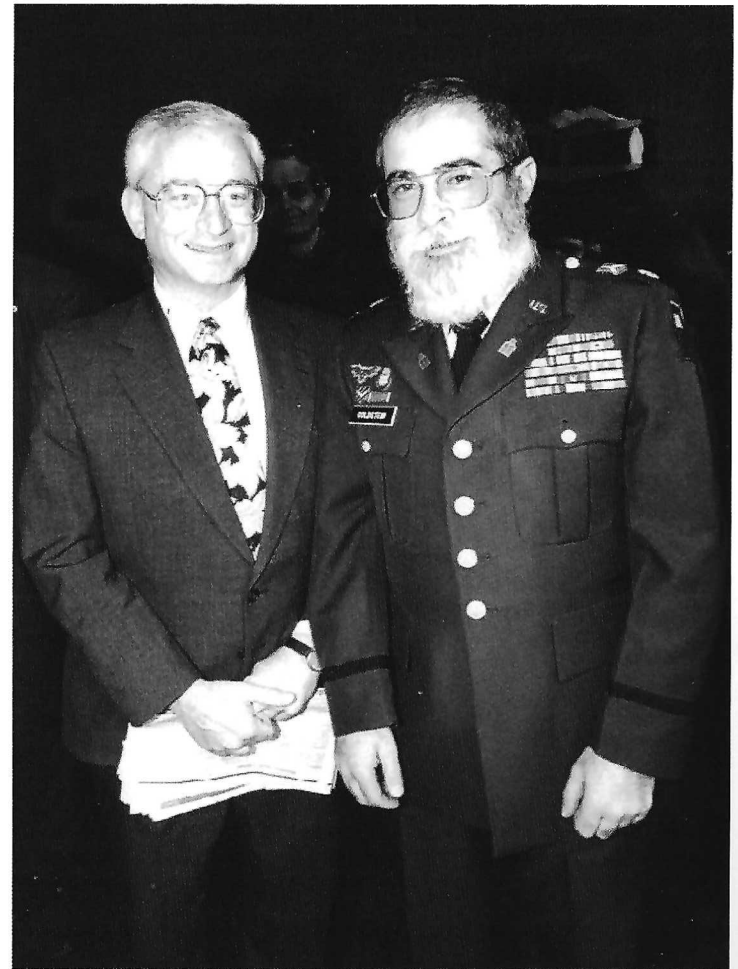
Rubin recalls a bias incident in Bronxville a few years ago in which anti-Semitic graffiti targeting high school teachers was sprayed on an underpass leading to the railroad station. Bronxville clergy responded to the incident by inviting the Jewish community to participate in a Holocaust commemoration at the Reformed Church in the village. A highlight of the program was the Bronxville High School choir singing Yiddish songs. The program, run by the clergy and co-sponsored by the Westchester Jewish Conference, has since been held annually.

Noto is hoping the mandatory reporting law will pass easily. "But you never know in legislation what may happen," he says. "It's in everybody's best interest to get as many groups as possible to support it." He notes that the Arab-American community in the county has shown interest in the legislation.

"I can't think of any civil or human rights organization in the county being against it," says Rubin. □



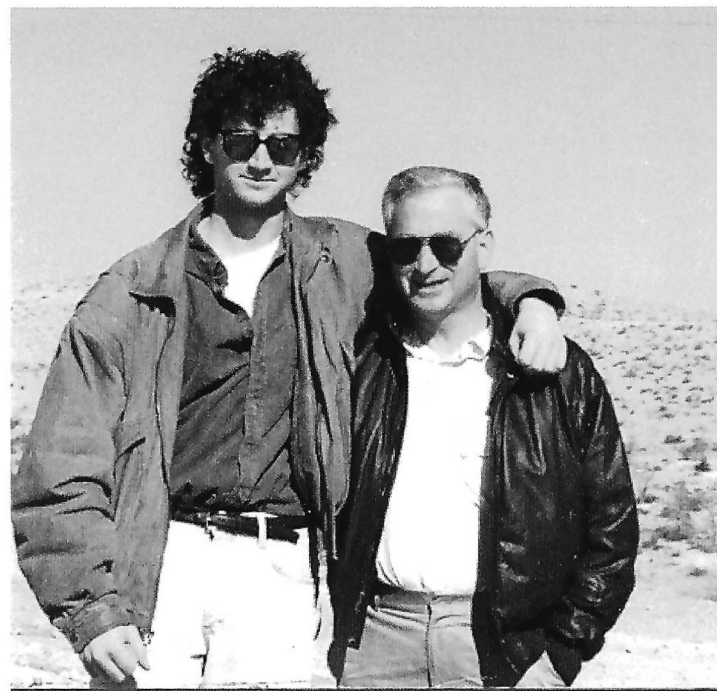
Benjy, seated, and Jonathan at our booth at the Clearwater Festival.



A member of the Chabad who also serves as a chaplain in the U.S. Army.



Former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir a featured speaker at an event.



Benjy and I were in Israel in December 1990, on a solidarity mission, just before the first gulf war.

“Officials
... must
come out
strongly
and
condemn
any violent messages
from students, staff
or citizens.

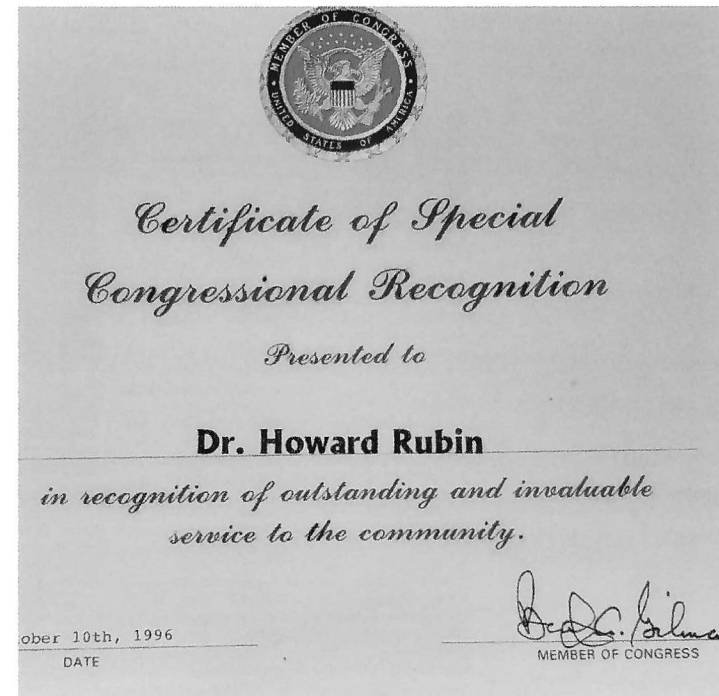
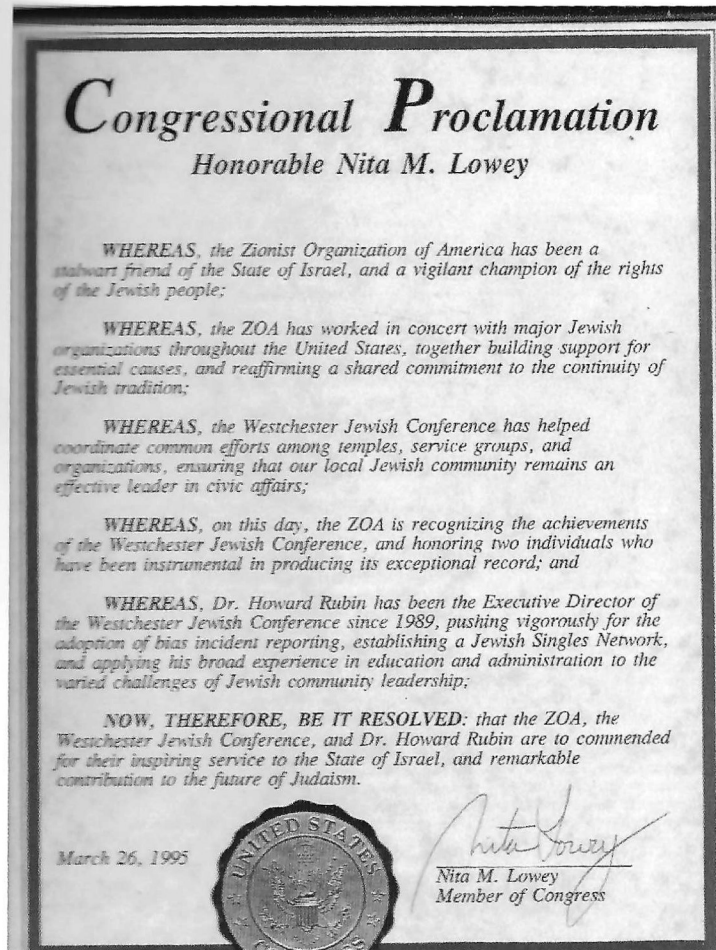


Remaining silent
gives the perception
it is condoned.”

— Howard Rubin,
executive director,
Westchester Jewish Conference.

The Gannett newspaper in Westchester County did a story about the Bronxville yearbook episode. Many people viewed it as a missed opportunity by school staff members to pick up the anti-semitic innuendo. And by not seeing it nor confronting the student they, as the adults in the room, were complicit.

The newspaper highlighted my quote as part of the coverage.



These Recognition Certificates were presented to me by Members of Congress Nita Lowey and Ben Gilman

Hard-Driving Howard

Westchester Jewish Conference chief, school principal, motorcycle maven: Howard Rubin, 60, does it all.

JUDITH NAOMI FISH
JEWISH WEEK CORRESPONDENT

Howard Rubin never intended to let retirement impede his career.

When he stepped down as superintendent of schools in Franklin Square, L.I., in 1989, Rubin, a Rye Brook resident, established himself as an educational consultant. Since then he has been sought out each year as an interim principal by schools undergoing administrative transition.

In addition, Rubin answered an ad in *The Jewish Week* for the job of executive director of the Westchester Jewish Conference. For six years he has been handling the day-to-day activities of the WJC, an umbrella for 88 local synagogues and Jewish organizations.

"I like to work," says Rubin, 60, and trim at age 60. "It is a challenge to come into a school and bring it stability. At the same time, I took the position at the Westchester Jewish Conference because of my interest in Jewish communal life."

During school hours Rubin, these days a principal at an elementary school in Putnam County, stays in touch by phone with his conference assistant, Marge Tunick. By late afternoon he is at his WJC desk; meetings are usually scheduled into the night.

"Both jobs are heavily human relations oriented," says Rubin, who attributes his success at juggling the two positions to efficient use of time, good health and the magic of computers and fax machines.

Maintaining dual roles in the secular and Jewish world is nothing new for Rubin. In Brooklyn where he grew up, he attended the New Lots Talmud Torah after a full day in public school. When he taught junior high in the borough, he headed in the afternoon for his second teaching job at a synagogue Hebrew school. Later Rubin complemented his day job as a Westchester County public school principal with a second principalship at the religious school of Congregation Knesset Tifereth Israel in Port Chester.

It was during his tenure at KTI that Saturday Hebrew school classes — a controversial issue in the Conservative movement — were introduced. Rather than banning wary Neshby school attendees, KTI moved to require students to be in school Saturday mornings to participate in junior congregation, hold Torah discussions and learn to lead the service.

"They dress up on Shabbos," says Rubin, "and there is no breaking of halachic rules. There is no writing."

The standards set by the Conservative movement, however, call for three days of Hebrew school in addition to synagogue participation.

But taking a stand on heated issues is, in fact, the furthest



Howard Rubin, right, played a key role in Westchester County's passage of a bias crimes bill, which was introduced by County Legislator Paul Melo, left. Photo by Lester J. Mahan

thing from Rubin's mind when he serves as director of the WJC.

"We're a consensus organization spanning the spectrum of Jewish religious thought and political thought," he says. "The goal of the conference is to unite the Jewish community in Westchester by promoting programs which provide a sense of calm Westchester."

"Because we're a consensus organization, we lack some of the glamour of other organizations that take a stand. Four years ago the question came up of whether American aid sent to Israel should be used to support settlements on the west bank. Some said the conference should support one side, some said the other. But we leave those decisions to member organizations."

Religious pluralism in Israel is another issue the WJC will not comment on. The conference does, however, support the Israel-Arab peace talks because, Rubin says, "Our stand is we support the government of Israel."

To demonstrate its position on the peace process, representatives of the conference have been meeting over the past year with members of the Yonkers-based Arab American Foundation. In November the two organizations held a reception celebrating the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan. They also jointly supported an anti-bias crime bill that was passed recently by the county Legislature.

Rubin points to the WJC Singles Network as another example of a successful conference program.

"There was a void here," he says, noting that the network, which holds its own events and also serves as a clearinghouse for other singles programs, now has a mailing list of 2,250 people.

Upcoming conference projects include organizing the 1996 celebration of Jerusalem 3000 in the county and establishing an on-line computer network for accessing WJC news.

On Sunday, March 30, Rubin and Rabbi Amiel Wohl of New Rochelle, a founder of the WJC, will be honored for their work with the conference by the Westchester region of the Zionist Organization of America.

"We are honoring Dr. Rubin," says Martin Schaller, president of the regional ZOA, "for all the projects and the work that he has done to unite the Westchester Jewish community — not only among themselves, but also with their non-Jewish neighbors."

Rubin makes clear that he owes much to the input and support of the three WJC presidents he's worked with — Sam Stein, who hired him, Saul Singer, and the present president, Don Landis — all outstanding Jewish leaders.

When not on the job, or jobs, Rubin finds time to indulge in his current interest — motorcycles.

"I got my motorcycle driver's license at 59," says Rubin, now the proud owner of two bikes. "My daughter said, 'Get a hobby,' but I think she was chagrined when I chose this one. I recommend it to anyone who wants a lot of excitement in his or her life."

Taking along the roads of Westchester on his '84 Honda may be just another way for Rubin to gain perspective on the 946 square miles that make up the county.

The Jewish population of 95,000 in Westchester, says Rubin, "is dispersed and in flux. There are growing communities in the northern and central parts of the county, well established communities in the southern part."

Drawing on his experience as a school administrator and his six years of studying the county as WJC director, Rubin zeroes in on the public schools as the magnet for the growth and stability of the Jewish population.

"The support of the public schools by the Jewish community is an essential ingredient for Jewish life here," he says. "In Westchester, which is generally an assimilated, secular Jewish community, when the schools lose their reputations, the Jewish families move out."

Rubin keeps abreast of developments throughout the county by reading "every local weekly paper and synagogue newsletter so I know what's happening in each little shul."

"I have developed a countywide view of the Jewish community which I didn't have before I came on the job. Planning conference programs must take into account the unique needs of Westchester." [J]

committee, led by Sonny Greenwald, Debbie Picker and others planned and created many dances and events that involved hundreds of single Westchester residents.

At that time I too was single. Meli and I had divorced. She moved to Manhattan and I stayed in our home in Rye Brook. Molly was attending SUNY Albany while Jonathan and Benjy continued living with me on Meadowlark Road in Rye Brook.

Chapter Thirteen

A New Hobby

I embarked on a new hobby. The genesis of the idea began when my son Jonathan bought a sport motorcycle. It was the type of bike that young men usually gravitated to. He took me for a ride on it and I had my heart in my throat as he whizzed through the neighborhood. He leaned forward and I held on to him with great trepidation. He was working at Avis at the

Westchester County airport and had enough cash to buy the bike. It usually sat in the garage because it seemed to be a passing fancy with him. But for some reason the idea of purchasing my own bike began to grow.

I was visiting my friend Mel Brodsky who was living near Atlanta, Georgia. I had been to a conference in New Orleans and decided to take a detour to visit Mel before returning home. Before boarding the flight to Atlanta I purchased a motorcycle magazine. Scanning the publication I became more motivated. During my visit with Mel I insisted that he take me to a motorcycle dealer so I could look closely at a variety of bikes. When I returned to Westchester I quickly went to the local motorcycle dealer in Port Chester. I explained that I never ridden a bike before and I would be learning on whatever machine I would purchase. With his suggestion I bought a well used, 1980's Honda with automatic transmission. Most, if not all motorcycles built

Helene in April of 2000. I became a very active member of the club. We went on regular Sunday and weekly rides all over south Florida. No more than three miles from our home I was tee-boned by a car that was leaving its community. The driver never slowed down at the stop sign. In the emergency room I told Helene I was retiring from motorcycling. It took almost a year to heal from my many broken bones. But up until that event I found biking to be a wonderful hobby.

Chapter Fourteen

Interim Principalships

Back to the 1990's. While I was doing my work as director of the Westchester Jewish Conference, I began nine years of serving as an interim principal in school districts who wanted time to recruit long term principals. This allowed me to legally, what is called, double dip. I was able to collect my pension from the NYS Retirement System as well as collect a salary, or a per diem stipend, as an interim principal. Each school district would apply to the NYS Education Department for a waiver to hire me, even though I was a retiree. The waiver

was always granted.

My first position as an interim principal was at the Valley Cottage elementary school in the Nyack school district. I served there for a half of a year and then was called back for a second year when the person hired did not work out.

For the six months between the two stints at Valley Cottage, Rockland County BOCES hired me to serve as interim principal at their Kaplan School. That was a fascinating experience, which I continued to do several times. The administration of the school kept turning over and they continued to ask me to return. The Kaplan School served severely handicapped students which ranged from Down Syndrome children to extremely autistic youngsters who were totally non verbal and needed frequent diaper changes. The staff of the school was outstanding. They were unique individuals who gave themselves totally to their students. They showed enduring patience and commitment. It was a school setting I had n

People



Rye Brook resident retiring as Jewish Conference director

Dr. Howard Rubin will be honored at the Westchester Jewish Conference's annual fall meeting on Thursday, Oct. 10. Dr. Rubin, a Rye Brook resident, is retiring at the end of this month after seven years as the Conference's executive director in order to focus on his job as interim principal of Purchase School.

Dr. Rubin has been acting as interim principal of various county schools for the past eight years. He served in that capacity at Ridge Street Elementary School in Rye Brook from January through June of this year.

The Conference represents 91 member Jewish organizations in the county that seek to unite the Jewish community. As executive director, Dr. Rubin was responsible for directing all the organization's programs and projects including publishing anti-bias catalogues for the county's public schools, creating a directory of member organizations, maintaining a comprehensive calendar of Jewish events, forming a Jewish singles network as well as planning an annual Holocaust commemoration.

"The years [I've spent as executive director] have



Dr. Howard Rubin

been very rewarding," said Rubin. "I've enjoyed them a great deal." "I hope I've been able to provide programs that have unified the Jewish community of Westchester County."

Having recently remarried, Dr. Rubin said he had promised his new wife he would cut down his professional commitments.

However, he said he plans to stay involved with the Conference.

"Whatever I can help to do, I'll do," he said.

The Oct. 10 meeting will take place at Congregation Kol Ami, 252 Soundview Ave., White Plains. The evening will begin with a dessert reception at 7:30

p.m., followed by a regular meeting featuring Karen Adler, a ranking federal official and a Jewish communal and political advisor. She will exchange thoughts on "The Responsible Use of Jewish Political Power."

Congresswoman Nita Lowey and other local dignitaries will participate in the festivities in honor of Dr. Rubin.

For more information, call 761-5100, ext. 139.

—Christine Chiang

Local News

PCMK

Wednesday

Jewish leader to step down

By Lynne Cascio
Staff Writer

Howard Rubin has long been the unseen force behind the community relations efforts of Westchester's Jewish community.

As executive director of the Westchester Jewish Conference, it has been his job to rally dozens of local synagogues and organizations to a common Jewish cause. He also works to promote anti-bias activities and combat infringement of any group's civil rights.



Howard Rubin

After seven years, however, he has decided it's time to step down.

Tomorrow will be his last day heading the White Plains office. A new director, Sheila Friedland, will take over Friday.

The conference, an umbrella organization for local Jewish groups, has grown from 58 to 90 members under Rubin's tenure — a change he cites as evidence that the community sees a need to be united.

"There's great diversity in the community's level of observance and political spectrum," said Rubin, a Rye Brook resident. "We've been successful in uniting this great variety of religious thought, as well as political thought."

Rubin, a retired administrator who is now interim principal at

many as seven days a week, often until 10 or 11 p.m.

"I want to be able to go home and eat dinner like anybody else," he said.

Rubin has been an excellent director who has put in far more hours than he gets paid for, Conference President Donald Landis said.

Rubin's contributions were honored Oct. 10 by about 100 representatives of member organizations.

While all the groups involved have differing views on Israeli policies and other matters, the conference seeks to find the areas that bring them together.

Catalogs listing anti-bias programs available to educators are now published and sent to public schools. A singles network has grown to 2,000 members.

The group also has reached out to non-Jewish groups and responded to events affecting the larger community.

When buses were bombed in Israel, conference participants met with local Muslims and issued a joint statement condemning the killing. When anti-Semitic graffiti marred several Mamaroneck homes, they joined in a protest march and issued reports supporting a police investigation.

As he passes the reins, Rubin already knows the next challenge for his successor — overcoming a cut in grant funding from the United Jewish Appeal, the organization's major source of support. The group, which survives on dues, grants and donations, is planning a Marvin Hamlisch concert as a fund-raiser in April.