

# The New King Of The Kings Bay Y

Russian-born Leonard Petlakh is breathing life into the facility by stressing ethnic diversity and outreach to the Russian community.

Walter Ruby

Special To The Jewish Week

At 1 p.m. on a recent Sunday, the Kings Bay Y on Nostrand Avenue in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, was pulsating with noise and energy. In the building's entranceway, many Russian-Jewish senior citizens were milling around, waiting to hear a concert by a music hall star from Moscow named Bella Gubenko.

Down the hall, Jewish teenagers from Russian, Israeli and American-born backgrounds hung out in a recreation room, playing ping-pong and pool and talking earnestly with counselors about an upcoming trip to Israel. Chinese-American youngsters played video games in the computer room, while in the basement, American-born senior citizens waited impatiently for Chinese and Russian kids to finish their swimming lessons.

All of this madcap energy and ethnic diversity might not seem out of the ordinary for a Jewish community center in south Brooklyn. Yet before the Kings Bay Y's new executive director, Leonard Petlakh, took over the community center at the beginning of December, 2006, the Kings Bay Y was a sleepy place utilized mainly by American Jewish senior citizens for its pool, sauna and exercise room.



Leonard Petlakh is only the second Russian speaker to take charge of an agency affiliated with UJA-Federation.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL DATIKASH

Despite the fact that Russian-speaking Jews make up at least half the Jewish population of the Y's catchment area—which includes parts of Sheepshead Bay, Gravesend, Midwood, Marine Park and East Flatbush—and Orthodox Jews are also a growing presence, relatively few representatives of either group patronized the Y. Meanwhile, the physical plant of the building, which was built in 1978, was deteriorating, and no one seemed to have an idea of what to do about it.

In less than five months, Petlakh, 35, and the team of mainly 20-something administrators and youth workers he assembled have gone a long way toward turning the Y around, say observers. Whereas the Y previously had virtually no teen group at all, it now has over 100 participants in its teen lounge group—an eclectic mix of Russian speakers, Israelis and American-born kids. They were attracted by a diverse program created by a 21-year-old Russian speaker named Daniel Zeltzer, a program filled with sports, but focusing primarily on Israel and Jewish identity.

The Aquatics Program director, a 22-year-old Russian-born Iraq war veteran named Ken Soloway, has made a major splash by organizing water volleyball and other competitive activities, bringing in large numbers of children, Chinese and African-American as well as Jewish. Assemblywoman Helene Weinstein, a longtime member of the Y, has put in a request for \$250,000 in state capital funding to help make the Y's locker rooms and bathrooms more accessible for the handicapped and senior citizens.

According to Weinstein, "I've been deeply impressed by Lenny's vision of the Y as a welcoming place for the entire community."

Taking a visitor on a tour of the building, Petlakh remarked, "It is extremely gratifying to see the great increase in people from diverse backgrounds we have managed to attract to the Y in just a few months. We are giving the message to the entire community: 'This is your Y, so come on in, because something new will be happening every day.'" He added, "We have also built a terrific team of young energetic professionals who believe in the mission of the agency and have shown a

willingness to work hard."

Ironically, just as the Y began to find its feet this spring under Petlakh, a recent budget deficit accumulated by the body's board of directors put its survival at risk. The deficit was apparently due to a paucity of fundraising on the part of the board. UJA-Federation agreed to a six-figure emergency loan with the condition that the board—largely composed of American-born Jews in their 60s and 70s—agreed to resign in favor of a temporary "work-out" group empowered to put the Y's finances in order.

Although some board members initially resisted that condition, the body appears set to announce this week that it will step aside. The new board is expected to include well-to-do figures in the Russian community and beyond who can augment its fundraising potential.

Said Louise Greilshheimer, vice president for agency and external relations at UJA-Federation: "We decided it was important to preserve the Y as a vital resource in an area with vibrant Jewish community. From the beginning, we saw Leonard Petlakh as our white knight with the mission of saving the Y, and he has been doing a terrific job."

Greilshheimer said that the impending loan from UJA-Federation to the board "will be a bridge that will allow the Y to reinvent itself."

Norman Green, president and chairman of the board since 2005, stressed that despite the controversy over the budget, the board remains "very happy that we hired

Leonard Petlakh, whom we continue to believe is the right person to lead this institution to the level it needs to be on. Not only has he brought in many more Russians, but we have also seen increases in the number of Orthodox Jews, not to mention members of the Chinese community... That wasn't happening in the same way before."

For Petlakh, the longtime assistant executive director of the Hebrew Free Loan Society and only the second Russian-speaker to take charge

of an agency affiliated with UJA-Federation (Misha Galperin, now executive vice president of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, served briefly as head of the Educational Alliance during the late 1990s), turning around the fading Kings Bay Y was the kind of challenge he had waited his entire professional career to undertake.

"Clearly, the Kings Bay Y was an under-utilized community resource, but I knew we had a large pool of young people, especially in the Russian community, who craved a connection with Jewish and Israeli culture," Petlakh said. "So I told my staff members, 'If we are offering an art class, let's make it into a Jewish art class. If it's a dance class, let's make it Israeli dance.' We have a diverse community, but I see Israeli-based programming as being the common denominator that draws them all together."

That principle seems to be working particularly well in the teen lounge program. Tatyana Plotkina, a 17-year-old Midwood High School student who joined the program a month ago, said she is enthused by the

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range of activities, including an ice skating expedition and trip to the Jewish Museum, and is pleased that "the kids I am making friends with here are from different backgrounds — Israeli and American Jews, as well as Russians like me."

Allen Edelman, 12, remarked, "The teen lounge is a great place to make friends and to learn about Judaism in a fun way, something I never experienced before in synagogue or anywhere else. We play games like Jewish bingo, which I really enjoy."

A witty and engaging conversationalist in Russian and English, Petlakh was born and raised in Minsk, now the capital of Belarus. He recalls that as a child he was called zhid (kike) so frequently that "I thought that was the correct term for my nationality."

After moving to Brooklyn with his family in 1989

at the age of 17, and spending a year at Lincoln High School, Petlakh enrolled at Brooklyn College, where he quickly found his way to Hillel. "I wanted a Jewish environment, and Hillel gave me that. I began reading on Israel and Zionism. It was also a great place to meet Jewish girls." One girl he dated at Hillel is his wife Janya, who today works in the financial office at Baruch College. The couple has two boys, age 7 and 3.

Enthused to have found his métier, Petlakh was hired as director of the Baruch College Hillel, a place that, like Kings Bay Y today, was on the edge of dissolution.

"When I came in as director, there was only enough money to pay me for one semester, but I figured I could save the program if I could expand the program by getting more kids involved. Not only did we succeed in

preventing the closing of Hillel, but our operation grew dramatically, and over the course of the following two years, I was able to hire several full-time staffers."

Petlakh moved on to the Hebrew Free Loan Society, where he served as associate executive director for eight years, strengthening ties to the Russian community to the point where the largest number of no-interest loans the venerable agency now grants goes to Russian Jews.

Petlakh realizes there is much more to be done in order to bring Kings Bay Y back to fiscal health, but said, "I can't but feel optimistic when I reflect that I inherited what was essentially a senior citizens center, and now the place is filled with young faces and bursting with youthful energy. The unique spirit that has been created here can carry us through the challenges ahead." ■

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