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Russian Influence Opens Doors to Diversity at Kings Bay Y

By WALTER RUBY

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 build-

ing's entranceway, a large group of Russian-Jewish senior citizens were milling around, waiting to hear a concert by a music hall star from Moscow. 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, Orthodox Jewish children, separated by gender, participated in classes in two upstairs rooms, 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 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. Despite the fact that Russian-speaking Jews make up at least half the Jewish population of the Y's

catchment area — 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 39-year-old building was deteriorating,

and no one seemed to have an idea of what to do about it.

In less than four months, Petlakh, 35, and his team of mainly 20-something administrators and youth workers have gone a long way toward turning the Y around. Whereas, the Y previously had virtually no teen group at all, it now has over 100 participants in its teen lounge group attracted by a diverse program, created by 21-year-old Russian-speaking Daniel Zeltzer, that is filled with sports, but focuses primarily on Israeli and Jewish identity.

The aquatics program has made a major splash with water volleyball and other competitive activities, bringing in large numbers of children, Chinese and



Teens volunteer at the Purim Carnival (above); Kings Bay Y group participates in UJA-Federation of New York's Super Sunday event (left); and Y executive director Leonard Petlakh (wearing tie) with Daniel Zeltser, teen services director.

African American as well as Jewish. And the Immigrant Services Department has strengthened the presence of Russian-speaking retirees and middle-aged people by offering classes in ESL and civics to prepare immigrants for the U.S. citizenship test.

Impressed by Petlakh's dynamism and vision, 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.

For Petlakh, who moved to Brooklyn upon arriving in the U.S. from the former Soviet Union at the age of 17 in 1989, turning around the fading Kings Bay Y is the kind of challenge he has waited his entire professional career to undertake. "Clearly Kings Bay Y was an underutilized 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. 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."

An engaging conversationalist in both 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 he enrolled at Brooklyn College, he 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. The couple has two boys, age 7 and 3.

Enthused to have found his métier, Petlakh served as a Hillel coordinator at Brooklyn College and later at Long Island University, before becoming the first Russian-speaking Hillel director at Baruch College. "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 get more kids involved. Not only did we succeed in preventing the closing of Hillel, but our operation grew dramatically."

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 agency now grants are to Russian Jews.

Petlakh cautions that the Kings Bay Y faces serious challenges ahead, such as overcoming a large budget deficit. "We have built a terrific team of young energetic professionals who believe in the mission of the agency," he says proudly. "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.' I am confident we will succeed in turning this place into a first-class Jewish community center."








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