Legislative Breakfast Celebrates 21st Anniversary

Announcing
New Project Of Adding Two More Floors To Our School Building  p.2

Bullying
and How to Confront It  p.13

Autisms Initiative Workshops Series  p.5

Student Activities At A Glance  p.8

And More
Contents

01  Message From Our Founder
02  SKHOV Celebrating 21 years
05  2018-2019 Workshops Series
07  Assemblyman Simcha Eichenstein
08  Carnival Created By, And For, Students
09  Students Activities at a Glance
11  Baking Expert Renuka Bhojaraj
12  Autism and Nonverbal Communication
13  Bullying and How to Confront It
14  Maybe Autism is My Super Power

Our school and center has been improving the lives of children diagnosed with autism and other developmental disabilities in a warm and nurturing environment. For 21 years, School & Center for Children with Autism

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Physical Therapy
Art Therapy

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For more than a decade, Shema Kolainu – Hear Our Voices has hosted an annual legislative breakfast to educate legislators about the importance of autism care and research, to advocate for continued funding to benefit children with autism and their families, and to honor individuals who have showed outstanding dedication to furthering Shema Kolainu's mission.

Our breakfasts are part of Shema Kolainu's overall mission to promote autism awareness and improve the lives of children with autism and their families. The autism rate has increased exponentially, with one in 54 children diagnosed with the condition. Since opening our doors, Shema Kolainu has grown by leaps and bounds. Starting with just three students, we now have educational and therapeutic programs for over 1,000, ranging from 3 to adult, and hailing from all five New York City boroughs. Shema Kolainu also offers a free workshop series for parents, students, and other professionals, funded by the NYC Council Autism Initiative.

We are also very proud of our exceptional, dedicated staff, who are committed to providing students with a first-rate education in a warm, nurturing environment. The love and support provided by our teachers is truly incredible. Through their efforts, each of our students is encouraged to discover their own unique voice and achieve their full potential.

In the future, Shema Kolainu – Hear Our Voices hopes to expand and grow further, introducing new programs and initiatives and expanding our facility to accommodate more students and staff. Reading this month's issue of Shema Kolainu magazine, we hope you will feel informed and inspired, sharing our passion to help students on the spectrum and their families.

With your support, it is our hope that we can continue our outstanding educational programs, enriching the lives of our students for many years to come.
On August 6th, Shema Kolainu – Hear Our Voices will be holding a legislative breakfast in honor of its 21st anniversary, marking a new milestone in its history. Founded in 1998 by Dr. Joshua Weinstein, Shema Kolainu – Hear Our Voices is a NYC-based school and center for children with autism and related conditions. Created to address the growing need for educational programs designed for children with autism, Shema Kolainu provides exceptional education through a variety of programs and an outstanding, dedicated staff.

Held annually for more than two decades, Shema Kolainu’s legislative breakfasts have been attended by a wide range of notable advocates, including legislators, dignitaries, and religious leaders. Guests have included former NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and current Mayor Bill de Blasio, among many others.

The primary objective of these events is to educate legislators about the importance of autism care and research, and to advocate for continued funding to benefit children with autism, as well as their parents. The legislative breakfasts also provide a venue to honor public officials and community leaders who have demonstrated exceptional dedication to Shema Kolainu’s mission.

Among the latter are NYC councilmembers Brad Lander and Mark Levine, who received the City Leadership award in 2017, and Saima Wazed Hossain, the daughter of Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who received the International Champion Award, also at 2017’s legislative breakfast. Hossain serves as Chairperson of the Bangladesh National Advisory Committee for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders, and was chosen by the World Health Organization (WHO) as their regional champion for autism in South Asia.

Shema Kolainu’s previous legislative breakfast, held in October 2018, was attended by NYC Public Advocate Letitia James, along with Queens Boro President Melinda Katz and former governor of New York David Paterson. The speakers discussed a range of issues, including providing employment opportunities for people with autism.

“Our children continue to amaze us every day, accomplishing more and inspiring us all,” Dr. Weinstein said at the event. “These “small miracles” as we call them, are major blessings. These achievements could not be possible without the dedication and support of our outstanding staff. We thank you for your continued support as we work together to stand behind our blessed children as they make new strides along their journey. We look forward to the next twenty years of making a difference in the lives of our children.”
During the 2018-2019 school year, Shema Kolainu – Hear Our Voices hosted several free workshops in NYC, funded by the NYC Council Autism Initiative. Focusing on a diverse array of subjects, including education, health, and advocacy for children and individuals with autism, the workshops featured presentations from distinguished professionals and experts in health and education for children and young adults on the autistic spectrum.

On November 27th, Shema Kolainu Occupational Therapist Alexa Moses, MS, OTR/L presented a workshop at Manhattan’s Touro College. Titled “Managing Emotions Through Movement,” the workshop focused on numerous important topics, including how children with Autism process and learn emotions of self and others; the benefits of movement and how it can help with self-regulation; ways of Integrating modern technology into treatment sessions; and proven movement based techniques and programs to enhance communication and manage emotions, among countless other benefits. The workshop was an excellent learning opportunity for all attendees.

Shema Kolainu's second workshop of the 2018-2019 school year was held on January 29th, and featured a presentation by Dr. Stephen Shore, a Clinical Assistant Professor at Adelphi University in New York and a member of the Icare4Autism Advisory Committee. Dr. Shore shared his findings from investigating various methodological tools for working with children on the autism spectrum. His workshop also focused on evaluating different approaches for supporting children with autism.

At the third workshop, held on March 26th, Mrs. Olga Vlasova, a Special Education Attorney with a B.A. in Psychology and an M.A. in Forensic Psychology, delivered a presentation on the education of children with special needs. Titled “Advocacy for special education services in NY: The rights of parents and their children with disabilities,” the workshop also focused on referrals for evaluation and re-evaluation, requests for independent evaluations, advocacy tips for having successful IEP meetings and information about special education services and support available in NY. The workshop offered an invaluable opportunity for parents and educators to gain new insights into the educational needs of children with special needs.

As an attorney, Mrs. Vlasova has been advising parents of children with disabilities and fighting for their rights for nearly a decade. Before going to law school, Mrs. Vlasova assisted victims of family violence and elder abuse in Brooklyn, NY as a social worker and program coordinator.

Shema Kolainu’s fourth workshop of the year was held on May 21st, also at Touro. Titled “The Basics of Pediatric Oral Motor and Feeding Therapy,” the workshop was presented by Mrs. Dina Ezagui, MS, CCC-SLP / TSHH, a
speech therapist from Brooklyn with over ten years experience working with children with autism. Mrs. Ezagui shared insights into various oral motor techniques, as well as feeding therapy exercises for the pediatric population.

On June 4th, Shema Kolainu – Hear Our Voices hosted its fifth workshop of 2019 at Touro College. Titled “Supporting the Transition of Students With Autism From School to Adult Life in the Community,” the workshop was presented by Dr. Meira L. Orentlicher, a Professor and Associate Chairperson of Research and Scholarship in Touro’s Occupational Therapy Department. Dr. Orentlicher has extensive experience helping students with special needs in their transition from school to adult life.

Dr. Orentlicher shared valuable, practical insights and strategies for helping students with autism transition from school to adult life. In her presentation, Dr. Orentlicher discussed individualized planning for community integration, partnering with parents and service agencies, and promoting student self-determination. She also emphasized the importance of focusing on the strengths and abilities of children with autism and other special needs, rather than their handicaps.

Held several times throughout the year, Shema Kolainu’s workshops have attracted hundreds of people and have proven to be very successful. SKHOV thanks the New York City Council Autism Initiative for making this possible by providing the necessary funding for this program.
On March 1st, 2019, Shema Kolainu – Hear Our Voices (SKHOV) hosted Assemblyman Simcha Eichenstein, the newly elected Assemblyman for the New York's 48th District.

In January 2019, Assemblyman Eichenstein was appointed to serve on several prominent committees, including Aging, Cities, Housing, Real Property Taxation, and Social Services, providing him with an opportunity to address the crucial needs of his district. Assemblyman Eichenstein’s past experience includes serving as a member of NYC Mayor Bill de Blasio’s legislative affairs team in Albany, and part of the mayor’s senior intergovernmental staff at City Hall.

His meeting with Dr. Weinstein, CEO and Founder of the SKHOV school and center, was focused on a discussion of plans for the future expansion of the school and increasing the number of students to be served.

Currently, SKHOV assists over 1,000 families from ages 3 to adult, in school and home-based programs in the greater NYC community. Due to the rapidly growing demand for placement of children with autism, SKHOV kicked off a “Raise the Roof” building campaign. Monies totaling $6,000,000 have been spent to complete Phase 1 – funding the construction of the original structure (1st and 2nd floors). In Phase 2, the school hopes to add 3rd, 4th, and 5th floors. The 5th floor, a one of a kind, will have Domed Rooftop Sports Center for Autism & All Special Abilities, Library and Technology Center, and High-Tech Sensory Gym & Equipment. The new floors will accommodate new classrooms and more than 100 students. The school and center will also be able to increase the number of staff and service providers.

“It was an honor and privilege to visit Shema Kolainu and meet with Dr. Weinstein to discuss the future expansion of the school,” Assemblyman Eichenstein said. “It takes a village to raise a child, and Shema Kolainu helps us make sure no child ever gets left behind. I look forward to working with them to meet the needs of all of our community’s children.”
In March 2019, Shema Kolainu – Hear Our Voices hosted its first ever Purim carnival. Planned and organized with the help of students, the carnival featured a variety of booths and activities, from a beanbag toss, lasso race, photo booth, target practice, and arts and crafts. The activities were designed to be both fun and educational, allowing the students to work on hand-eye coordination and social development while having a good time. The students had a list of instructions that they followed from setting up the booth, running the booth, cleaning up the booth, they were so involved and proud of themselves. They couldn't stop talking about the carnival for days after because they were so excited on what they accomplished. To us, when you see a child taste success, that’s what keeps us going.”
On April 2, 2019, Shema Kolainu – Hear Our Voices was visited by a delegation of students from Central - Yeshiva University High School for Girls as part of a chesed (kindness) initiative sponsored by the school. The visiting students were led by Jacqueline Welkowitz, the coordinator of Yeshiva University’s P’tach program for students with special needs (the coordinator of the chesed project itself is Laura Fruchter).

“Our school is very big on chesed missions,” Ms. Welkowitz says. “Every grade goes on several chesed missions throughout the course of the year. And this particular chesed mission, Shema Kolainu was chosen.”

Since this year’s chesed mission to Shema Kolainu coincides with the upcoming holiday of Pesach (Passover), the Central students made seder plates with children, as well as frogs (representing one of the 10 plagues in the Passover story). The girls were also introduced to Dr. Joshua Weinstein, the Founder and CEO of Shema Kolainu – Hear Our Voices. Dr. Weinstein emphasized the importance of chesed, and reminded the girls of the importance and impact of their volunteer work in visiting the school.

Overall, the event was a wonderful opportunity for the students of both Yeshiva University High School and Shema Kolainu – Hear Our Voices.

Students at Shema Kolainu - Hear Our Voices Conduct Mock Seder

In honor of the holiday of Pesach (Passover), Shema Kolainu – Hear Our Voices hosted a mock seder for its students. The event covered all of the aspects of the pesach seder, including making washing cups and bags for the afikoman (the piece of matzah broken off and hidden), singing the mah nishtanah (the four questions asked by children at the Passover seder), and much more.

The mock seder was planned and organized by speech therapist Hindy Apfelbaum, art therapist Tzippy Silberman, and occupational therapist Alexa Moses, with the help of students in the afterschool program. As with the Purim carnival held in March, the teachers hoped that involving the older students in planning and organizing the event would instill them with pride in their work, along with being a great opportunity to socialize with their peers.
At the end of June, Shema Kolainu – Hear Our Voices held its annual graduation ceremonies for its school age and pre-school students. Attended by parents, the graduations featured slideshow presentations highlighting major events and activities of the year, short speeches presented by students, and a song performed by the graduates focusing on their dreams and goals. The older students presented short speeches, a presentation focused on their dreams and goals.

Ms. Esti Reich, one of the teachers who helped organize the graduation ceremony for the older students, described it as a moving and meaningful experience.

Over a period of two weeks, students at Shema Kolainu – Hear Our Voices got an up-close, first-hand look at the amazing transition of caterpillars into butterflies.

“We learnt about the cycle of butterflies, because it’s the spring and that’s when the butterflies lay their eggs and they hatch,” pre-school teacher Sipoora Fejal explained.

Ms. Fejal added that the students also learned different skills based on the butterfly's life cycle, such as sequencing butterflies in their cycle (egg, cocoon, etc.).

“It’s a science experiment,” Ms. Fejal said. “The students see exactly what happens in the real, outside setting.” She added that the project also taught the students about handling, feeding, and caring for animals.

Ms. Fejal mentioned that the students have participated in other science-based activities, such as learning about bubbles and what they’re composed of.

“We discussed what we think bubbles are made out of,” she said, “and we tested it out with vinegar, water, and soap.”

Classroom teacher Esti Reich, who was also involved in the butterfly project, noted that the older students tracked the development of the caterpillars in a diary, which was then posted on the wall.

“We kept the caterpillar on top of the closet, and we monitored it and watched the different stages,” she said. When they turned into butterflies, the students enjoyed setting them free.
For children with special needs, especially those on the autistic spectrum, healthy eating can be a challenge for a variety of reasons. As noted by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, these include strong food likes and dislikes (mainly due to sensory issues), lowered appetite as a result of medication, and not eating enough food due to issues with concentration.

Mrs. Renuka Venkata Bhojaraj is a baking technologist from India with 30 years of experience, and holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Home Science from Bangalore University. Mrs. Bhojaraj, who has extensive experience working with special needs children, will bake with Shema Kolainu’s students and share dietary and nutritional insights with teachers as well.

Mrs. Bhojaraj is highly knowledgeable about American and Indian baking techniques, as well as kosher dietary laws. She is also the mother of a daughter with cerebral palsy, making her committed to the welfare of special needs children on a personal level, especially when it comes to their health and nutrition.

Millets are unique grains that are organic, high in protein, and low in carbohydrates. In India, Mrs. Bhojaraj developed numerous millet-based recipes for Grami Super Foods, a global brand.

Mrs. Bhojaraj said she learned about Shema Kolainu – Hear our Voices from Manhattan Bake Shop, where she works. Ms. Bhojaraj added that she has experience working with special needs.

Mrs. Bhojaraj said that in her experience, children with autism tend to prefer soft foods. For educators and parents of children with autism, a variety of cookbooks are available with nutritious, gluten-free, and allergy-free recipes. These include:

- The Autism Cookbook: 101 Gluten-Free and Dairy Free Recipes;
- the Kid-Friendly ADHD and autism cookbook;
- and Coach in the Kitchen, a cookbook with hundreds of recipes for teens and adults on the autism spectrum.

Mrs. Bhojaraj is preparing many recipes to be used in the baking class at Shema Kolainu next month.

“Being the mother of a special child, I used to go to special schools and do volunteer work for them,” she said. “I used to bake millet cookies, instead of giving regular cookies with high protein and carbohydrates. Children with special needs have a lot of allergies, like gluten allergies and wheat allergies. So millets are gluten free and [don’t trigger allergies].”
Autism and Nonverbal Communication: How Technology Can Help

Verbal communication is a major challenge for many children and adults with autism, ranging from mild to severe depending on the individual. According to the autism advocacy organization Autism Speaks, one third of people diagnosed with autism are nonverbal. Thankfully, technology offers an outlet for many nonverbal individuals with autism, especially children, to express their thoughts and feelings. These alternative communication methods, known as Alternative/Augmented Communication (AAC), can be utilized in a variety of ways, from speech generating devices to apps featuring pictures.

Tablets, smartphones, and PDAs are just a few of the devices that those with autism can utilize to communicate. These devices can be customized to support a multitude of features, including task-sequencing, activity-cueing, and communication assistance. There are also numerous apps supported by mobile devices, such as phones or tablets, which facilitate communication.

At Shema Kolainu – Hear Our Voices, a school and center for children with autism and related conditions, educators believe strongly in the effectiveness of AAC. One advocate in particular is Shema Kolainu’s Education Director, Gili Rechany.

“Using scientifically proven methods tactics from the field of Applied Behavior Analysis, we have been able to teach children to communicate using communication boards and voice out devices,” Ms. Rechany says.

By utilizing AAC and other technological and educational resources, Shema Kolainu is dedicated in giving each child the ability to communicate in his or her own unique way.

One example is the ReacTickles app, which uses touch, gesture, and audio input to help with interactive communication. iCommunicate, an app for the iPad, allows users to create pictures, storyboards, flashcards, routines, and visual schedules, along with the ability to record custom audio. Another app, Proloquo2go, provides natural-sounding text to speech voices, high resolution, up-to-date symbols, and a vocabulary of 7,000 items. These are only a few of the countless AAC apps available for individuals with autism.

“Effective use of these devices led to effective communication and improvement of the quality of life for our students and their families,” she adds. “Some additional results of effective uses of these devices include verbal communication and mainstreaming readiness for some of our students.”
Growing up, I was no stranger to bullying and exclusion. This experience is sadly all-too-common for many children, particularly during their adolescent and grade school years, when peer pressure stands out in many ways and is the equivalent to having a target-sign on your back.

Throughout my school years, I was the proverbial child who marched to the beat of his own drum, making me a prime target for bullying. I also struggled with behavioral issues that hampered my academic performance. It wasn’t until my diagnosis of Asperger’s Syndrome at around nine or ten years old that I was able to place these issues in a broader context, and understand where they might be coming from.

Though I initially knew nothing about either autism or Asperger’s, as I grew more informed I realized that my quirks were not anything to be ashamed of, but on the contrary, a point of pride. For example, it wouldn’t surprise me at all if my passion for reading and writing were in some way connected to having Asperger’s. Thankfully, I had an incredible support network, including my parents and family members, who helped me from the outset with navigating any roadblocks I encountered. As an elementary school student, when I was facing some of my most serious issues, my grandmother actually visited the school personally and sat in on my classes in order to help me. That level of concern and care allowed me to take enormous strides in terms of maturity, independence, and overall personal growth.

Sadly, not all of those on the autistic spectrum are so fortunate. Many remain undiagnosed until adulthood, never having had the benefit of therapy and support that would have been extremely beneficial in their formative years. As a result, they face a much greater challenge in learning to adapt.

What can be done to combat this crisis faced by so many children and young adults with autism?

Ultimately, the responsibility falls to parents and teachers to foster the empathy and social skills of non-autistic children, encouraging them to treat their peers with compassion, dignity, and respect. Another issue worth noting is that many autistic children who are victims of bullying may lack the social cognition to realize they are being picked on in the first place. The IRCA suggests several solutions, including offering concrete examples of what is and isn’t bullying, and implementing a school-wide no-bullying policy, with procedures and consequences to be followed when it occurs.

There is no question that the lives of children with autism can be greatly improved if their peers are taught to appreciate all that they share in common, rather than their differences: and that uniqueness should be celebrated, instead of being greeted with suspicion and hostility. I know that my own childhood would have benefited greatly from this perspective, and I’m sure the effects of bullying would be diminished if more children were encouraged to look at their peers, both with and without autism, from a more compassionate perspective.

Sources:
http://healthland.time.com/2012/09/05/why-autistic-kids-make-easy-targets-for-school-bullies/
https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/pages/bullying-and-students-on-the-autism-spectrum
Maybe Autism Is My Superpower
Sees Autism As a Gift, Not a Handicap

While autism is often labeled as a “disability,” children and adults on the spectrum have amazing abilities and a variety of gifts and talents, including, in some cases, a photographic memory and powers of retention that can seem almost superhuman.

The view of autism as a gift, rather than a handicap, inspired the creation of Maybe Autism is My Superpower. In this illuminating book, Angela Blanchet offers a glimpse into the extraordinary mind of her son Ben, a thirteen-year-old with autism. In his own inimitable voice, Ben shares his encyclopedic knowledge of everything from stores and street signs to maps, health, and even phlebotomy.

The book is divided into several sections, each focusing on a different aspect of Ben’s “superpower.” One example is his perfect pitch, which allows him to identify musical notes in the sounds of everyday objects (“when the microwave in the kitchen beeps, it is in the C note”) and replay songs from memory. Ben’s mother discovered this talent early on, when he reproduced the medley of the ice cream truck on his keyboard entirely by ear. Ben has also demonstrated an incredible capacity for speed reading, a feat he performs with the aid of a highlighter and pencil.

“The scribbling helps me read very fast,” he explains. “It sometimes feels insane because the words move really quickly, but the highlighter and pencil help me.” Ben is also gifted with an exceptional memory, allowing him to recall everything from the information on store and street signs to trivia about health and medicine.

Ben notes that his abilities could allow him to pursue a number of different career paths, including music tutoring, researching health and medical topics, and opening his own supermarket (due to his interest in supermarkets and checkout machines).

“What Ben has taught me is that when the focus on children becomes more about their strengths than their weaknesses, more about their abilities than their disabilities, then their gifts will soar,” Angela writes. “There is unlimited potential for the unique and special strengths that children with autism have. The trick is to pay close attention to these strengths…what a better world it would be if we could all shift our mindset to see their superpowers.”

Maybe Autism Is My Superpower is an excellent resource for educators and parents, and a wonderful source of encouragement and self-esteem for children on the autism spectrum, and children as a whole. The message of the book is poignantly captured in the words of Ben himself.

“I want people to know that everybody has a superpower, even kids who don’t have autism have superpowers,” he writes. “But I think kids with autism’s superpowers are different and special. I am happy. I like having autism and I am excited about growing up and using my superpowers.”
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