



## Media Release

Reprinted story from the Oak Park Wednesday Journal  
August 20, 2003  
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Teaching and celebrating  
Jewish history, culture,  
literature, music, values and  
identity in a humanistic context.

### Community group celebrates Jewish history, culture.

#### The Secular Jewish Community and School of Oak Park offers families a new approach

By Laura Stewart

Out for a walk together. Oak Park neighbors Elisa Lapine and Marilyn Dunn's conversation turned to religion. "I said I wanted a relevant Jewish education for my children that I could believe in," re-calls Lapine. "Marilyn said she felt the same."

What they were looking for, explains Lapine, was something different from what they could find in a temple. "We wanted a slightly different focus on the history, culture, values and identity of being Jewish as opposed to the more faith-based. God-centered focus," she says.

It's not a new idea. There are secular Jewish schools around the country; Lapine's parents started one in Cleveland in the 1960s. Lapine and Dunn agreed to give it a try here.

"We put up a few flyers, put a notice in the paper, and 15 people showed up to our first meeting, including people I didn't know who said they'd been looking for something like this," says Lapine.

That was last March. Encouraged, the fledgling group decided to hold a Passover seder that reflected their secular approach. Nothing fancy they rented space at Pilgrim Church, sent around a few e-mails inviting people to come, bring food. The result, notes Lapine, was "remarkable."

"It was a real eye-opener for me. It felt like Field of Dreams if you build it they will come. Seventy-seven people came. It felt so good, so positive. And in the end, everyone pitched in to clean up. To me, that showed a real sense of community; we were in this together. After that, it really took off," she explains.

Lapine believes that many of the adults in the new group have young children starting to ask questions about religion. Lapine says her 5-year-old has started asking her about God and what the family believes. Adam Kallish, one of the groups' newest members, says that's what prompted him to join.

"My kids are 6 1/2 and 5, and I don't know how to answer their questions. I feel like a deer in headlights. I was looking for some kind of Sunday school when this came up. I'm Jewish and my wife is not; we want our kids to appreciate and understand the rich history and heritage Jews have been able to give the world, along with all of the other major religions," says Kallish.

What makes a community like this viable, says Lapine, is a school that teaches and celebrates Jewish history, culture, music, literature, values and identity in a secular, humanistic context. "In order to keep alive a Jewish identity, we must give our kids pride and a connection to a community," she says. But that can be difficult for parents uncomfortable with traditional religious beliefs.

How does that translate? Lapine uses the seder as an example: "At our seder, Marilyn and I rewrote the blessings in the Haggadah [a book that tells the Passover story]. We changed the traditional blessings to, 'We celebrate this wine,' or, 'We celebrate this food.' Blessings but not prayers. We're making new traditions. We want our kids to know we believe what we're saying."

It may seem odd to leave religion out of the celebration of a religious holiday, but Lapine doesn't see it that way. Holidays, she notes, have not only religious but also historical and cultural roots. And it's not that the religious aspect is forgotten. It's just not emphasized.

"Judaism is like a tree, with different aspects, or branches, that people choose to highlight," she says. "For me, the faith part isn't the part of Judaism I'm connected to. That doesn't make me more or less Jewish. It's part of the Jewish tradition that people don't agree, and there's room for the differences. You question, disagree, and find your own way."

#### School's in session

Sunday school starts Sept. 7. Classes will meet three times a month during the school year from 9 to 11:30 a.m. at Wonder Works Museum, 6445 North Ave. Children are divided into three groups: early primary (K-I) will introduce kids to Jewish life and values; middle primary (grades 2-3) will focus on the origins of the Jews, and late primary (grades 4-6) will study Jewish history from the end of the Roman Empire to the development of modern Jewish secular humanism. Classes, taught by parent who are all trained teachers, will include Yiddish and Hebrew language instruction.

Parents, or people without children, will be encouraged to meet together during the Sunday school hours to discuss the organization's future. Holiday celebrations are already in the works. Lapine would like to develop more adult activities, like book groups, and there are definite plans, she says, to prepare students to become B'nai Mitzvah. She hopes teens will help decide how they can be part of the group.

"I attended a secular Jewish school as a kid, and I loved going," says Lapine. "It was a joyful, positive, fun experience. That's the gift I want to give our kids."