

Reprinted from Windsor Hights Herald

Jewish Learning Center to Open Sunday

Mordecai T. Mezrich Center for Jewish Learning will be housed in the former East Windsor Township Senior Center location.

DATE POSTED: Thursday, September 20, 2007 2:59 PM EDT

By: Dana Lynn Fletekval

EAST WINDSOR — The idea for Rimon blossomed out of one person's need to invigorate Judaism in the minds of others. And now, beginning Sunday, Rimon, the Mordecai T. Mezrich Center for Jewish Learning, will do just that for years to come if Livia Mezrich is successful.

Ms. Mezrich, plans to open the center at the township's former senior center building at 483 Dutch Neck Road on Sunday with an evening of violin and piano music.

Ms. Mezrich, 56, has lived in the township for 29 years and is a member of East Windsor's Economic Development Committee. She received a degree in curriculum development from the University of Michigan.

"My degree ties in with my love for teaching Judaism," Ms. Mezrich said. Rimon is the Hebrew word for pomegranate, a fruit said to have 613 seeds, much like the 613 commandments in Jewish Law.

Ms. Mezrich, founder and president, decided there was a need for a Jewish learning center after contemplating the story line from a book she had read while on a trip to Israel.

The book, "Sages and Dreamers" by Elie Wiesel, discusses a story of a rabbi who was sentenced to death for publicly teaching the Torah. Roman soldiers wrapped the rabbi in a Torah scroll and lit it on fire. The rabbi's students asked him what he was seeing. He answered "the scrolls are burning, but the letters are stronger than the fire: they are indestructible; untouched, unharmed, they are flying up to heaven."

"I began to superimpose the picture of rabbi burning and the letter flying to heaven with the pictures of the crematoriums built by the Nazis and the smoke billowing across the countryside," Ms. Mezrich said. "It made me think that we need to act and bring those letters back down, and revitalize the rich Jewish culture."

Ms. Mezrich said Jewish people are so focused on remembering the Holocaust, but in doing so they should restate what it means to be Jewish.

Ms. Mezrich's Poplar Road home became a beginning point for the learning center. On any given night of the Shabbat, close to 100 people would come pass through her house, Ms. Mezrich said.

"Every Sunday night, a different rabbi came to speak," Ms. Mezrich said. "We had services, we ate, we socialized and we sang."

Last October, Ms. Mezrich bid on the senior center property and won. The day marked the anniversary of the death of her father-in-law, Mordecai Tchemna Mezrich.

Mr. Mezrich came from the town of Mezrich, Poland. He and his sister were the only survivors of his nine brothers and sisters. His family, along with most of the town, was herded either to be shot in the forests or taken and killed in the camps of Bergen Belsen and Treblinka, Ms. Mezrich said.

She observes the Jewish tradition of Yahrzeit for her father-in-law. Yahrzeit marks the anniversary of the death of a parent or close relative and is usually observed by burning a candle for an entire day in memory of the loved one.

"When I came home (from bidding on the old senior center) and saw the candles flickering in his memory, I knew that we had to name the center in his honor," Ms. Mezrich said. "He dedicated his life to his commitment to Judaism."

The building cost \$270,000, with some of the money coming from a Yeshiva University (New York City) grant. Ms. Mezrich said she has received donations from community members and she is hoping for more money from Yeshiva.

Planned renovations of the building would cost about \$200,000, and tens of thousands of dollars are needed for office and lounge furnishings, computer and audiovisual equipment, and maintenance materials. The estimated annual operating budget is at \$118,500.

She is seeking more grants and donations to fund the center.

Ms. Mezrich said the center will be distinct from any other center in the area.

Approximately 48 percent of American-Jewish households belong to synagogues, according to the National Jewish Population Survey for 2001-2002.

"A lot of people want to connect to Judaism, but might not want to make a commitment to a synagogue," Ms. Mezrich said. "The most important thing is that people won't have to commit."

The center will be modeled after Yakar in Jerusalem and London, The Manhattan Jewish Experience, Drisha and Makor in New York, Ms. Mezrich said.

"These places are centers within centers," Ms. Mezrich said. "Lectures on the arts, religion and texts will be available for the community similar to those at the centers we are modeling."

Yeshiva University will provide professional help to the center for creating a library as well as provide volunteers to add "knowledge and spirit" to the program, Ms. Mezrich said.

A Beit Midrash will be a focal point of the Rimon center. In this house of study, visitors can experience a one-on-one "chevruta" learning, a tradition that dates back thousands of years, Ms. Mezrich said.

Ms. Mezrich said group classes will be taught in the Talmud and Bible as well as the philosophy and history of Judaism. Through a distance learning program, visitors to the centers will have access to teachers from around the world. "The Beit Midrash will be more than just classes," Ms. Mezrich said. "It will be tradition with adventure."

Forums on controversial and timely topics of importance to the entire community will be a part of the Rimon tradition, Ms. Mezrich said. Ms. Mezrich said, for example, a professor of ethics might be asked to

discuss abortion or stem cell research. The discussion could be followed by a series of rabbis, each with a different angle, who would provide Jewish insights into the issues. Other programs at the center will include the World and Life of the Soul, women's programming, and Shabbat, or Sabbath, Ms. Mezrich said.

"The Shabbat programs will combine all the different elements of the day: prayer, study, food, song and friendships," Ms. Mezrich said. As of now the center is zoned for adult education, meaning anyone who is over the age of 18 is welcome, Ms. Mezrich said.

However, Ms. Mezrich hopes to change this and eventually allow parents to bring their children to the center. She would like to be able to have children's programs as well.

The Jewish learning center will be opening on Sunday when it will present an evening of music with Diana Tsaliovich (violinist) of West Windsor and Ellen Rosensweig (pianist) of East Windsor as her accompanist at 7 p.m.

Tickets start at \$18 and are available at the door.

McCaffrey's will provide refreshments and Lee's Turkey Farm on Hickory Corner Road will provide parking space if there is not enough at the center.

"Every community needs a center where residents can interact with each other and learn," Ms. Tsaliovich said. "I am very happy to be a part of something I so strongly believe in."

The township opened a new senior center in September. The East Windsor Township Senior Center now is on Lanning Boulevard.