Obituaries

'Teaching was her medicine'

Educator and community role-model, Barbara Jacobson dies at 63

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PROVIDENCE — For Barbara Jacobson, death just had to wait. There were too many of her students at Temple Beth-El's religious school who needed help with their b'nei mitzvah, or Hebrew students, or community college pupils, or those whom she privately tutored when she found the time. And, nothing, not even cancer, was going to stop her from seeing every child through.

When death finally claimed her last week, educators from near and far came to pay their respects in a 150-strong honor guard, which stretched out the door of Temple Beth-El into the streets. Martin Middle School in East Providence, where she taught English as a Second Language (ESL) full time, had such an outpouring of teachers who wanted to attend the funeral that the entire school was closed for the day.

"Some people hoard knowledge. Barbara loved to share it," said fellow ESL teacher Catherine Reed. "She had at least two master's degrees. At least."

As a Hebrew tutor Barbara was always in high demand. Rabbi Sarah Mack read a note from one of Barbara's Hebrew school students at her funeral, that said, "I learned so much from her, and most important of all, I learned how to love and respect my Jewish tradition."

Rabbi Leslie Gutterman remarked that her attention and devotion "nourished students like the countless plants in her home."

He said that even in the face of withering illness, she was "inexhaustible." Friends smiled when thinking of her boundless optimism, and recalled Barbara's famous motto that "teaching was her medicine."

Friends said she was able to find the spark inside each child and allow even the most self-conscious students to feel good about themselves. Even when she was ill, she would never let herself, or her students, give up.

Jamie Manville, of East Greenwich, had both of her sons prepare for their b'nei mitzvah with Barbara. She said that even in her final months, Barbara was running back and forth across the *bimah* telling him what to expect and when to stand or sit.

"With every breath she had, she wanted to prepare her kids," Manville said.

She was so devoted to her calling that she wasn't always able to enjoy the fruits of her labor — she taught students at the Community College of Rhode Island on Saturday, and so missed many of the b'nei and b'not mitzvah of her students.

She took her craft seriously, and attended many Jewish educator conferences both locally and in Israel. Barbara was awarded the highest honors from both Temple Beth-El and the Bureau of Jewish Education for her labors.

Minna Ellison, director of the Bureau, stood in the rear of the sanctuary at the funeral and watched the long train of her colleagues slowly exit.

"I have never seen this level of professional respect before," Ellison said in awe.

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