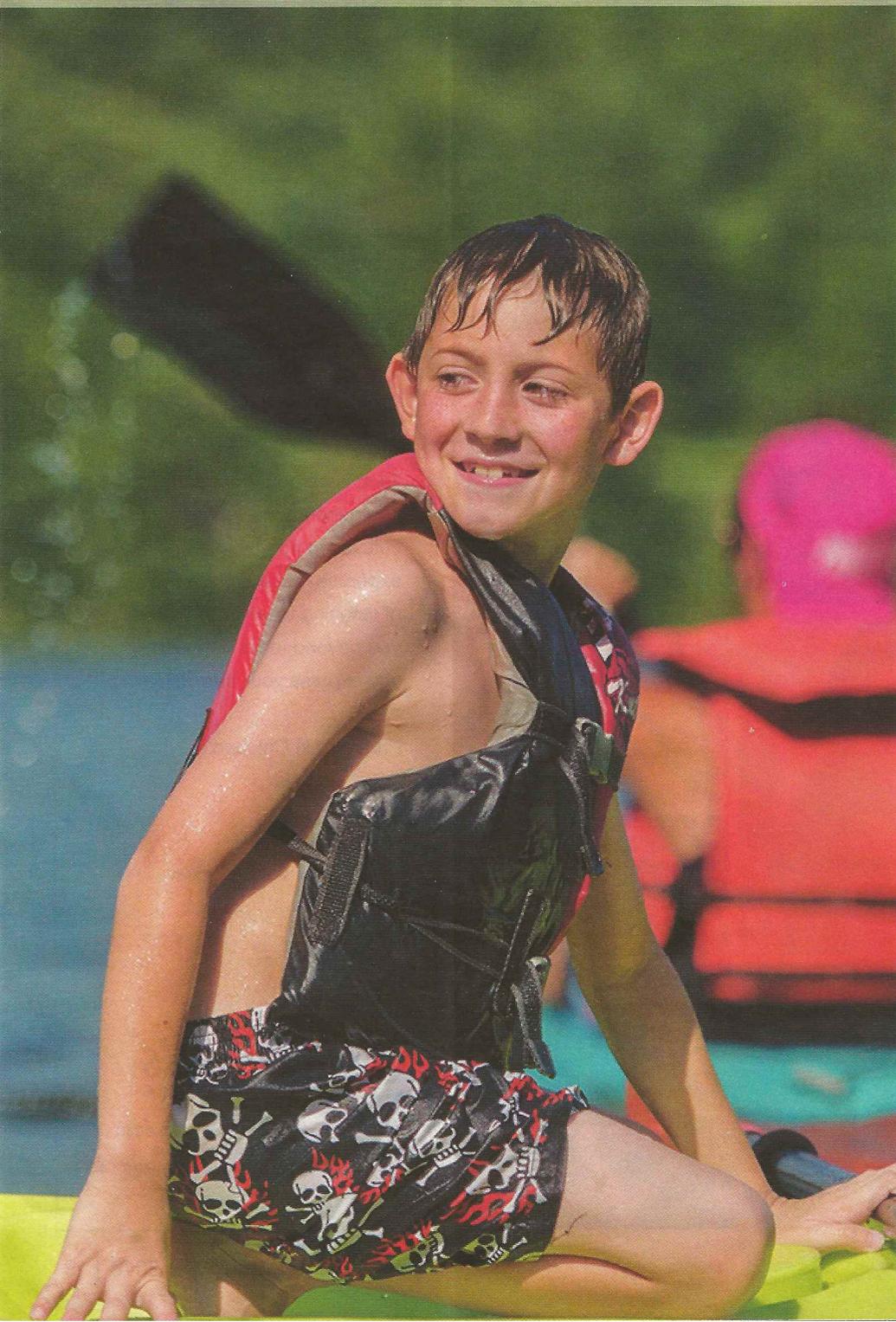


Creating vibrant Jewish experiences in

Southern Illinois



By ROCHELLE NEWMAN RUBINOFF

SMALL JEWISH COMMUNITIES are often forced to become strong Jewish communities—perhaps not in number, but in spirit and devotion. Such is the case for the Jews in Southern Illinois.

“Despite it being a small community, it is still a committed one that sticks together,” said Aaron Hadley, executive director of the Jewish Federation of Southern Illinois, Southeast Missouri, and Western Kentucky, called SIMOKY for short.

As is the case with many smaller communities, the Jewish population SIMOKY serves is shrinking, according to Hadley. Some synagogues have shuttered their doors, and overall access to Jewish life can be challenging.

Hadley said their community may be small, but it’s still mighty. “The community remains steadfast,” he said. “Everyone is in touch with neighbors and friends. The community basically functions like an extended family.”

There are still several synagogues in the region. One of them, Congregation Beth Jacob, in Carbondale, remains operational and holds services every Friday night.

Jack Wides’ family helped found the synagogue in the 1940s. “We can’t afford a rabbi now, but we have a lot of members who are very talented with Judaic knowledge,” he said. Wides, president of Beth Jacob, estimates there are some 30 families who are currently members, down from 40 families at its height.

He grew up in nearby Murphysboro, but has lived his entire adult life in Carbondale, where he raised his son and daughter. “I’ve always had a strong Jewish identity, and in all my years here, I’ve never experienced any anti-Semitism,” said Wides, a retired businessman.

In addition to Friday night services, Beth Jacob throws



Clockwise from left: A camper rock climbing; campers Aaron Hadley (center), Jonathan Thursby (right), and others at Camp Ben Frankel in 1988; alumni, including Aaron Hadley (far left) and Thursby (far right) return for a Camp Ben Frankel reunion in 2016.

periodic potluck dinners, hosts community Seders, and celebrates lifecycle events together. “Like any community, we come to together to help people when they need it,” Wides said.

The synagogue and SIMOKY are closely aligned. But due to the changes in demographics, SIMOKY focuses the majority of its resources and energy on the program that provides the most meaningful Jewish experiences for the children of the area: Camp Ben Frankel.

Never heard of it? Neither have most people, readily admitted Hadley, who is the camp director in addition to his leadership role at his Federation.

In fact, it may be one of the best-kept secrets in Jewish camping.

Located on 3,000 acres of beautiful forested lakefront property in Makanda, Ill., adjacent to Carbondale, the camp can serve 100 campers at full capacity. It has everything any other camp has—horseback riding, a ropes course, sports, a rock band, theater, fine arts, even air-conditioned cabins—but there’s something intangible too.

Indeed, there seems to be something very special going on at Camp Ben Frankel.

“The camp has been very important in the children’s lives in southern Illinois,” Wides said. “Kids from various towns get

to be friends and this continues that community feeling.”

They have a strong alumni community, where former campers participate in both their family camp and send their own children to Camp Ben Frankel.

One alum is Jonathan Thursby, who grew up in Decatur, Ill., halfway between Chicago and St. Louis. From the moment he arrived at the camp as a camper in the mid-1980s, he was hooked. “I formed immediate friendships, just real sincere, right out of the gate.” He spent the next decade at camp progressing from camper to counselor to head counselor to program director.

Living in an area with few Jews during the school year, it was summers at the camp that gave Thursby a concrete sense of his Judaism. “I was always the only Jewish person in my school,” he said. “But going to a place where everyone is Jewish and all from small Jewish communities—just like me—gave me a safe place to explore my Judaism.”

Now a father of two, Thursby sends his children to the camp, and they, like him, love it there. In fact, this summer, since Thursby and his kids are currently based in London, his kids hope to win the award for campers who travel the farthest distance to attend camp.

As was the case for Thursby as a kid, many of the campers have few other Jewish experiences during the year.

“We work with a lot of kids where this is their primary Jewish experience,” said Hadley, who also attended the camp when he was young. The camp has daily services, intended to make Judaism accessible to everyone.

Camp Ben Frankel attracts kids who wouldn’t have thought Jewish camping was an option for them. They offer a unique and competitive pricing model with four levels of pricing; people are encouraged to pay what they can, and SIMOKY and camp scholarships help with the rest. “We want the camp to be an option for everyone,” Hadley said.

“Camp used to be considered more of a privilege,” he said. But he emphasized that now it is much more than recreational. “It inspires Jewish identity and continuity. It was true then and it is even more important now.” ■

There are still openings for Camp Ben Frankel’s 2018 season, running June 24-July 22. For more information, visit www.campbenfrankel.org.

Rochelle Newman Rubinoff is a freelance writer living in the northern suburbs of Chicago.