

# The Stars of the Shalom Park Freedom School Movie Fundraiser Were Not on the Screen

By Amy Lefkof

Nearly 200 people attended the Shalom Park Freedom School (SPFS) Brooklyn Castle movie fundraiser on April 25 at the Sam Lerner Center. The evening featured a chess documentary where low-income, minority inner-city chess whizzes, with the help of dedicated parents, teachers, and administrators become the country's leading middle school chess team and secure places in New York City's most prestigious public high schools.



SPFS volunteers Harriet Meetz and Dr. Iris Cheng manned the Will Call table.

But perhaps the real drama of the evening was not on the big screen, but rather at the podium where speaker after speaker spoke about the difference that the SPFS (the first Jewish-sponsored Freedom School in the nation and a model for others since) has made in the lives of the 50 campers (or "scholars") who have attended SPFS for six weeks each summer since its inception in 2011.

Welcoming speaker, Temple Israel's Rabbi Noam Raucher, featured as the SPFS "breakdancing rabbi" in the fundraiser's Welcome to Shalom Park Freedom School slideshow (visit [www.spfreedom-school.org](http://www.spfreedom-school.org)), stressed the importance that Jews place on education and partnerships in education.

The next speakers were Principals Beth Wardy of Sterling Elementary and Carol Rodd of Huntingtowne Farms Elementary, the two schools that are in year-round CMS faith-based partnerships with Temple Beth El and



Principal Carol Rodd from Huntingtowne Farms Elementary and Principal Beth Wardy from Sterling Elementary.

Temple Israel, respectively. Both principals reacted emotionally to the slideshow showing their students enjoying enrichment during their time at Shalom Park. These

activities include swimming lessons, storytelling at the Levine-Sklut Judaic Library, molding ceramic masks in the LJCC Ceramic Studio, learning photography in the beautiful outdoors, participating in the Holocaust Butterfly Project, doing yoga, learning basic ballet positions, cooking, and discovering the movements of chess pieces.

Both principals explained that their schools are high minority schools with nearly 90% of their students living in poverty situations, and as many as 40 homeless students at each school living in extreme crisis. Both principals credited the literacy-based Shalom Park Freedom School with providing 50 students from these two schools with a safe summer camp which helps 90% of the scholars avoid summer reading loss – with 65% gaining one or more levels of reading comprehension after just one summer.

Susan Jacobs, Director of the Temple Beth El Religious School, emotionally explained her own involvement as a volunteer SPFS cooking instructor: "I saw a Shalom Park Freedom School student with whom I had become particularly attached, running, dreadlocks flying, with open arms yelling, 'It's the cooking lady, the cooking lady.' He threw his arms around me in a giant bear hug and I was over the moon." Jacobs' mother, Florence Jaffa, a local artist and member of Temple Israel who has taught linocuts to the scholars for the past two summers, was a row captain at the fundraising event. During her presentation, Jacobs explained that while there is no cost to the children who attend SPFS, the yearly operating cost of

SPFS is \$60,000, 50% of which is raised from individual donors. Given that SPFS raises funds one year in advance to ensure continuity of the program, Jacobs implored members of the Shalom Park community to consider a multi-year pledge when filling out their pledge cards or to make a donation online at [www.freedom-schoolpartners.org](http://www.freedom-schoolpartners.org).

The closing speaker, teen board member Elyse Bodenheimer, who recently wrote a children's book about her grandfather's experience as a young boy during the Holocaust, pointedly noted that the Jewish community must continue to lead the fight against indifference especially when it involves children of economically disadvantaged communities, saying, "While no one in this room can do everything to help these economically disadvantaged children, everyone in this room can do something."

Shalom Park Freedom School, approaching its third summer this June, is a collaboration of eight Shalom Park agencies: Temple Israel, Temple Beth El, The Levine-Sklut Judaic Library, The Charlotte Jewish Day School, Levine Jewish Community Center, Jewish Family Services, The Jewish Federation of Greater Charlotte, and The Foundation of Shalom Park.

By the end of the evening the beauty of this collaboration among the eight Shalom Park agencies was clear: by lifting up the two economically disadvantaged communities of Sterling Elementary and Huntingtowne



Shalom Park Freedom School Teen Board Members Kelly Albert, Annie Brown, and Marissa Uri, in vintage movie theater popcorn trays designed by SPFS Volunteer Betsy Rosen.

Farms Elementary, we lift up the entire Jewish community.

Please visit [www.spfreedom-school.org](http://www.spfreedom-school.org) to make an online donation. Checks for single year contributions and multi-year pledges can be sent to Freedom School Partners at 1030 Arosa Avenue, Charlotte, NC 28203. Remember to note "Shalom Park Freedom School" on your check or when making an online donation. ✪

Photos courtesy Alan Goldberg.

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