

State & Local

Artistic students are finalists in environmental contest

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NJJN Staff Writer

A videotaped clay figure puppet show about planting trees by Arielle Bernstein of West Caldwell, a drawing about praying in nature by Lee Meyers of Montclair, and a PowerPoint presentation about conservation and feeding animals by Ally Schachtel of Essex Fells — all are finalists in an environmental art contest sponsored by Babaganewz.com, the Jewish education website.

All three young artists are fourth-grade students in the religious school at Congregation Agudath Israel of West Essex in Caldwell.

The goal of the contest, which spun off from a lesson on Tu B'Shevat, the Jewish New Year of the Trees, was "to have students think about the environment from a Jewish perspective," according to Aviva Werner, editor of Babaganewz.com, a project of Behrman House publishers.

All finalists will receive a water-powered alarm clock. The winner, who will be selected through voting at Babaganewz.com, will receive a solar-powered backpack. (The backpack is equipped with a solar panel, and electronics can be plugged right in.)

Finalists were selected by a panel of judges on March 25.

Originally planned by CAI bet class teacher Tammy Epstein as an

in-class activity, the project was scheduled for what turned out to be a snow day. She encouraged stu-



Arielle Bernstein and a frame from her multimedia contest entry

Arielle took her inspiration for her clay multimedia entry — in which children decide to plant a tree together in a park and later enjoy the fruits of their labor — from her own family's experience planting an apple tree in their yard. "I've liked watching it grow," she told NJJN in a phone interview. "Last summer we got three apples. This summer, I hope there are more."

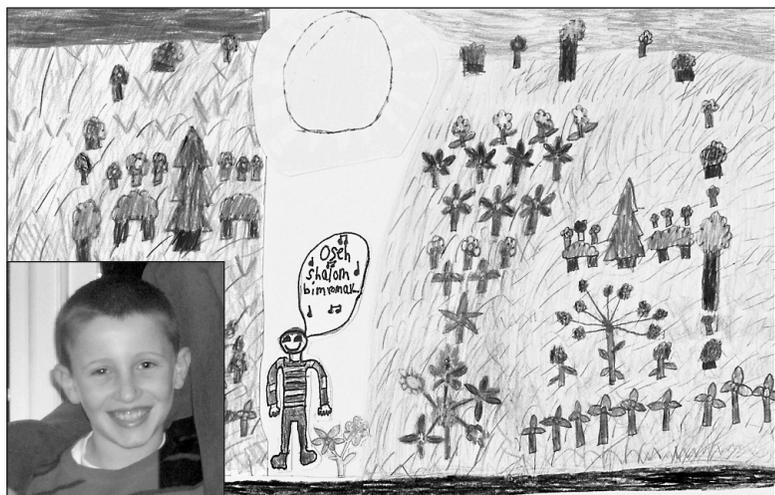
Ally's PowerPoint presentation includes information on conservation as well as games to monitor a player's selfishness or selflessness when it comes to environmental preservation. She was particularly struck by the teaching that you should feed your animals before yourself (*Deuteronomy 11:15*). Since Tu B'Shevat, she told NJJN in a phone conversation, she and her sister make sure to feed their dog breakfast before they eat.

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dents to take on the challenge at home, and five did. Epstein, who said she was thrilled with the success of her students, frequents Babaganewz.com, saying it's a site she visits "regularly to get inspiration for my lessons. I try in each lesson to have one key message. For Tu B'Shevat, it was conservation, and the contest tied in beautifully."

She offered the students some different ideas and quotes. Lee was struck by the teaching of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav, who taught that it is better to go outside a city and pray near plants because it is peaceful and quiet.

"That teaching really meant something to me," he told NJJN.



Lee Meyers and his environmental art work



Ally Schachtel said she entered her PowerPoint presentation in the contest to see "what I could do for the environment."

Hebrew Mamita wows the women

Poet Vanessa Hidary raises awareness of stereotypes, pride

SUSAN BLOOM
Special to NJ Jewish News

An exploration of "what's hot and happening" in the Jewish community was the theme that drew nearly 300 attendees to the Aidekman campus in Whippany May 3 for Women's Awareness Day 2011.

Particularly well-positioned to offer that assessment was keynote speaker at the Women's Philanthropy of United Jewish Communities of MetroWest NJ event: actress/poet/playwright Vanessa Hidary, also known as "The Hebrew Mamita."

A native New Yorker of Syrian and Russian-Jewish descent ("I call myself a Sephardi-Ashkenazi smoothie," she joked), Hidary has played to audiences nationwide with her rap-infused spoken word performances, most recently appearing at Tribefest 2011 in Las Vegas as well as the 2010 International Lion of Judah Conference in New Orleans.

Hidary interspersed audience dialogue with her hip hop-influenced poetry, performing "Queen Esther," a tribute to her beloved Sephardi aunt; "The Top Ten Tell-Tale Signs That You Work a Lot in the Jewish Community," highlighting some of the funnier moments she's experienced performing at Jewish venues; and her signature piece, "The Hebrew Mamita," a commentary on stereotypes, anti-Semitism, and Jewish pride. Hidary, who concedes that she has "become a Jewish role model, which brings with it a huge responsibility," also performed a piece that included her concerns over racism within the Jewish community itself. Hidary noted while she performs frequently for Jewish audiences, she routinely presents her act outside of the Jewish community as well, regarding such performances as helping to edu-



Vanessa Hidary — aka the "Hebrew Mamita" — chats with guests at the May 3 Women's Awareness Day.

Photos by Robert Schneider

cate people and bring them together.

Hidary's performance concluded with an audience Q&A, during which she discussed her start as an actress and her calling as a poet in recognition of an absence of strong voices in this niche within the urban Jewish female community.

Hidary has produced a CD, *The Hebrew Mamita*, and will soon publish her first book, a collection of poems and stories called *The Last Kaiser Roll in the Bodega*.

Presented annually for over 15 years and described by Women's Philanthropy director Sarabeth Wizen as "an educational and outreach program with a fund-raising component," the event kicked off with a breakfast followed by opening comments from cochairs Marsha Hoch and Debbie Rovner, who said they were gratified to offer

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Supporters of Women's Philanthropy have breakfast at Women's Awareness Day on the Aidekman campus.