

State & Local

Author, mother chronicles her rejection of hasidic roots

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Special to NJ Jewish News

Security guards at a book lecture?

Although Deborah Feldman is neither a politician nor a celebrity, organizers of her Oct. 3 appearance at the Green Brook Country Club Book Club in North Caldwell said the author's own concerns made the precautions necessary. Her memoir about leaving the Satmar hasidic movement has aroused a great deal of controversy.

Since the publication earlier this year of *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots* (Simon & Schuster), Feldman said, she has received "death threats every single day." And while the Green Brook audience of 400 responded with overwhelming support and her appearance took place without incident, an anonymous person did submit the question "How do you feel about being a goy?" during the event's Q&A session.

"I'm not a goy," Feldman responded.

Feldman's memoir chronicles the 23 years she spent in Williamsburg, Brooklyn's Satmar community, a strict hasidic movement organized in the 1950s by Holo-



Following her appearance at Green Book Country Club, Deborah Feldman signs copies of her book for attendees.

caust survivors. She describes a community in which women are groomed solely for marriage and motherhood, have restricted access to education, and are prohibited from such secular activities as riding bicycles, wearing pants, or driving cars.

Among other experiences, *Unorthodox* details Feldman's unhappy arranged marriage at 17,

the birth of her son two years later, and the oppressive events that led to her eventual departure from a community that she contends "doesn't maintain Judaism, but rather ignorance, hatred, and prejudice."

Feldman answered dozens of audience questions ranging from inquiries about the unique practices observed by the Satmar followers to details of her departure from the community with her son, to the education she pursued at Sarah Lawrence College, and to her current life. She and her son, now six, live in New York City.

"We're doing fine and we're going to keep doing fine," said Feldman. Now working on a follow-up to *Unorthodox*, Feldman, 26, said she feels "part of a much bigger and more diverse Jewish community now."

Despite "the many nights you go to sleep thinking you're a terrible person and mother, it's not courage but desperation that leads a person to do what I did," Feldman said of leaving her previous life behind. "When something is so bad that the scary alternative seems better, it's time to go."

'It's all possible'

According to Feldman, the Satmar community has responded angrily to the book, and members of her own family have encouraged her to commit suicide. "They can't wait to dance on my grave," Feldman said. At the same time, she said, "I still connect to many insiders there who are pretending to fit in, and I

know that the book is being read and putting ideas into the heads of other girls. Through the book, I want to give other women who feel like me the idea that they can go out there and make a life for themselves — it's all possible."

In an interview with NJN, Feldman said that education led to her transformation. "Everything starts with education," she said. "It gives you the courage, determination, and tools you need to change your life."

Audience members responded with several ovations during Feldman's appearance. "I believe in progressive women, freedom for women, and women's rights, and that's what Deborah Feldman represents," said Penny Sherry, 63, a resident of West Orange and a board member of National Council of Jewish Women, following Feldman's presentation.

"Deborah Feldman is incredibly

brave and heroic," said Marlene Cohen, founder and chairwoman of the Green Brook Country Club Book Club, which previously hosted best-selling authors Erik Larson, Mary Higgins-Clark, and Julie Orringer, among others. According to Cohen, it was Feldman who expressed concern about potential protesters, "so we enlisted extra security to ensure that both she and our attendees would be protected."

"I identified with Deborah's book and knew others would be interested in what Deborah had to say," said Cohen. "I love controversial authors and truly enjoy seeing our audience members so engaged by an author and a topic."

For more information on the Green Brook Country Club Book Club, contact Cohen at mmlc2926@aol.com. For more information on Feldman, visit www.deborahfeldman.com.



Author Deborah Feldman, left, with Green Book Country Club Book Club founder and chair Marlene Cohen.



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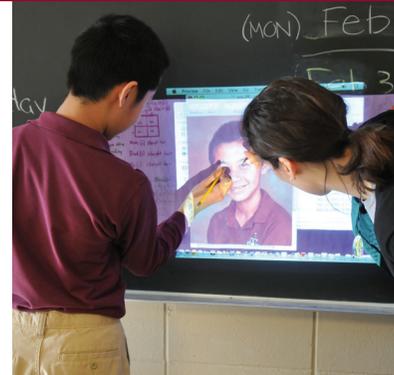
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