

Sheldon Low, teachers infuse music into the preschool experience

By **SUSAN JACOBS**

Associate Editor

On Sunday, up-and-coming Jewish musician Sheldon Low will perform a concert at Community Day aimed specifically at preschool students, with music from his recent album, "It's All Challah to Me."

In tandem with the concert, 1,000 copies of Low's CD were distributed to local Jewish families with preschool aged children, thanks to funding organized by the Agency for Jewish Learning (AJL).

But Low is not the only one bringing music into the lives of local Jewish children.

Stephanie Davis, who worked for many years in jobs ranging from real estate to medical transcription, recently returned to her passion of teaching music to young children. This school year, she has been teaching regular music sessions to preschool students at Hillel Academy, the Jewish Community Center and Temple Emanuel.

"Who's ready to jump around?" she asked a group of Hillel preschool students on Tuesday morning.

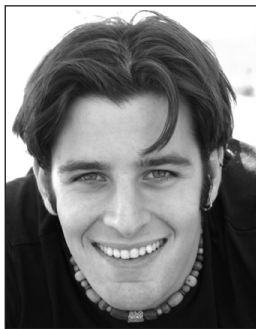
In a half-hour session, she had the children singing, jumping, tapping on instruments and marching around the room. Davis has a regular routine with the students, and they have come to expect to hear a mixture of familiar English and Hebrew songs.

On Tuesday, one of the songs, about the plague of frogs in Egypt, helped get the children focused on the upcoming holiday of Passover.

"We love having her come," said Robyn Chotiner, preschool coordinator for Hillel. "It really enhances our curriculum tremendously."

In addition to being fun, and providing children with a creative outlet, preschool music also has educational benefits.

"Music is an important component for educating Jews of all ages about Judaism, and for young children in particular," Edward Frim, executive director of



Sheldon Low

the AJL, wrote in response to an e-mail inquiry. "Jewish music creates a developmentally appropriate context for the Jewish concepts and values we teach, and it also helps provide parents with the tools to talk about such values and concepts with their young child."

Davis said she often hears from parents about the impact her lessons have had on the children.

"They come home singing the songs and talking about Morah (Hebrew for teacher) Stephanie," she said.

Since she incorporates Hebrew into the song sessions, the children get early exposure to the language, which some congregational preschools are not otherwise able to provide.

The AJL is working with Davis and several synagogue preschools to secure funding that would make it possible for her to share her music with additional schools next year.

According to Low, Jewish music is both an educational and a community-building tool.

"It's a quick way of bridging gaps," he said. "It's a really important tool to speak to all demographics, all ages, all at once, especially youth."

A child who knows Jewish music will automatically feel more comfortable in synagogue and other Jewish settings when he or she hears familiar, beloved songs.

Low and his mentor, musician Rick Recht, also try to make Jewish music cool, by setting prayers and songs about Jewish identities to rock melodies that resonate with kids.

Low was first exposed to contemporary Jewish rock in his youth.

"It blew me away," he said.

The music also helped him understand that he could integrate his Jewish and American identities, a message that he also sends through his music.

While Low's previous albums have been aimed at older children, he decided this time to focus on the preschool set, who are very impressionable.

"Preschoolers respond really quickly to music," he said. "They're so excitable, they're so fun when presented with music. They soak it up like sponges."

Davis agreed.

"The kids love it so much," she said. "They look forward to me coming."

But it's not all fun and games.

Davis, who studied at Duquesne University School of Music and Chatham College, carefully plans the sessions to be stimulating and educational.

"It evolves every day for me," she said. "It's a challenge."

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Want to go?

Sheldon Low will perform a free concert for preschool children and their families on Sunday, March 30, at 4 p.m. at Community Day.