

Centers For At-Risk Teens Themselves, At Risk

**With its funding slashed,
future of Our Place™ in jeopardy;
'I'd be on the street without it,' teen says.**

Stale cigarette smoke hanging in the air behind him, the sounds of weights clanging and billiard balls crashing in the background, Motti sits on a frayed couch in the heart of Flatbush one recent night and talks about what it is like — or was — to be an at-risk Jewish teenager.

Now 17, he came to Brooklyn seven months ago from the Midwest, where he was failing at school and fighting at home. Here, he says, he lived with a member of his family, but was still lost, “chilling on the streets, doing drugs.”

That changed a few months ago, Motti (not his real name) says, when “a friend,” someone he’d hang out with wasting time, told him about Our Place, a drop-in center for teens, many from Orthodox backgrounds.

He came one night, one of the more than 6,000 troubled teens helped by the center in the last dozen years. And he kept coming back. “Every night,” Motti says. Shooting a little pool, watching some TV, talking with the adult volunteers and teenage peers who hang around the center, down a flight of stairs, through an unmarked door on Avenue M, a business center of Brooklyn’s heavily Orthodox neighborhood.

The teens, mostly from Modern Orthodox and black-hat backgrounds, have the classic street look — garish T-shirts, jeans or cargo pants, suspicious eyes that give every visitor the once-over. Some of the boys are bareheaded; some wear stocking caps.

Were it not for Our Place, a 12-year-

old independent institution under Orthodox auspices, “I’d be on the street,” Motti says.

Now, he says, he’s afraid he may end up back there. Our Place may have to close.

The organization has depended on state aid and some private philanthropic support. Since the middle of this year, when government funding, the victim of budget cutbacks, stopped, Our Place has gone into major debt to keep its doors from closing. Due to the economic conditions the past few years have been more and more difficult for the organization, so cuts have been made and locations closed. With the new circumstances the organization will have to close its doors. Just a few years ago, before the economy collapsed, the Our Place annual budget was \$1.8 million, Chaim Glancz a program director says.

Glancz, 50, a “Brooklyn-born-and-bred” resident of nearby Borough Park who started befriending at-risk Jewish youth two decades ago and has served at Our Place since it was founded, called some of the center’s major supporters together earlier this month. “I wanted to pull the plug,” to close down Our Place before the debt grew larger, he says.

Give us a little time — we’ll try to raise the needed funds, the supporters said.

The boys — a separate “Our Place Too” for Jewish girls is located a few miles away in Flatbush — come up to Glancz, slapping him five or offering

him a bite to eat, as he shows a visitor around the 4,000 + square-foot converted karate studio.

In one wood-paneled room is a ping-pong table, along a row of pool tables. In the corner, a few boys are huddled around a large-screen TV, watching “N.C.I.S.” On the other side of a dividing wall are teens grunting on free weights and weight-lifting machines. There’s a jamming room with a complete set of drums, a small therapy room for personal counseling, and rows of prayer books and Jewish texts.

“We do no kiruv,” he says, using the Hebrew term for religious outreach — there are plenty of rabbis who do that.

Our Place, a response to the growing number of teens from Orthodox homes who have turned to street-life and substance abuse in recent decades, concentrates on the kids’ psychological and educational needs. Through its day school division, it helps students receive a GED high school diploma.

A separate co-ed post-rehab recovery program, titled The Living Room, is based at yet another location. Hundreds of young adults in their early 20’s are part of this program.

“Today’s troubled youth have a common denominator: they are searching, seeking and looking for that elusive answer to quell their inner turmoil,” an Our Place brochure states. “Naïve, frightened and alone, they are seduced and beguiled by drug dealers, molesters and criminals. Our Place offers troubled youth the opportunity

of rediscovering themselves, their beliefs, aspirations ... and ultimately, their future."

"It's a home away from home — my friends are here," says Robert, 16. He says the therapists and volunteers have helped him tame his temper. "I used to be angry all the time."

Our Place has made him "a better person."

"Our mission is to get the kids back into the community," to restore them to their families, Glancz says.

"We treat them like our family," Glancz says.

Of the some 7,000 Jewish teens — mostly boys — who have passed through the Our Place doors, Glancz says, about 70 percent are considered successes. They're off drugs, back in school, back at home, happily married.

The rest?

"Some are still hanging around," still drifting, still doing drugs. "Some we lost" to the streets, Glancz says.

"Some we buried." This past year alone over 25 teens in the New York Tri-State region died from overdose.

Without Our Place, he says, "we would be burying more kids."

While Our Place is likely the largest organization with such drop-in centers for at-risk Jewish teens, and sponsors "the most extensive" array of daily services for members of both sexes, it is not only located in Brooklyn NY. Our Place has a program in Israel called "Our House" and has opened similar drop-in locations in several other Jewish neighborhoods, including Lakewood, NJ, Queens NY, and Monsey in Rockland County., NY. The teens, he says, are concerned by reports that their place may close.

"I can't believe it," Motti says. "This is my home. I've been clean [off drugs] for a long time because of this place."

What will he and the other nightly drop-in visitors do if Our Place closes?

"I have no clue," he says. "[We're] in

trouble... I really have no clue."

Joey, 15, who also comes every night to "chill" and play chess, says he'll probably be "back on the streets" if Our Place closes; the same for most of his friends.

Joey's parents, who live in Brooklyn, encourage him to come here, he says. "They're happy I'm not on the streets."

On a typical night, about 70-80 boys come and go at the Avenue M site, like the tide.

When the boys walked down Avenue M after dark this week, they saw a familiar sight down the block — a group of teens, hoods over their heads to protect against the early winter cold, hanging out on the street.

For further information, or to donate please visit www.OurPlaceNY.org

Excerpts from an article written by Steve Lipman