

Three moms start nonprofit to help Jews in need

By Tracy Sullivan

WEST HARTFORD — Three stay-at-home Jewish moms and best friends have created a nonprofit organization that does good deeds for Jews in need.

Robin Fierston, Stephanie Gitlin and Melissa Weinstock, all of West Hartford, founded Deeds for Needs, Inc., an organization whose mission is to help Jews in need by providing goods and services to fulfill the ever-changing needs of the Jewish community and its individuals.

The three women come from diverse professional backgrounds, but they became fast friends after their first children were born. Fierston, a West Hartford native with a degree in early childhood education from Capital Community College, worked in the Greater Hartford Jewish Community Center's early childhood department. Gitlin, who is originally from Maryland and has a law degree from the University of Pennsylvania, has lived in West Hartford for almost 10 years and practiced law at Shipman & Goodwin LLP as a commercial litigator. Weinstock grew up outside of Pittsburgh and moved to Connecticut in 1994 after graduating from Penn State. She worked as a consultant for Andersen Consulting and later worked for The Hartford.

They met before their children were born. Gitlin, who already knew Fierston, met Weinstock at a VOICES event, sponsored by the Women's Division of the Jewish Federation of Greater Hartford. They were all pregnant at the same time, and after their first children were born, Gitlin invited Fierston and Weinstock for a playgroup in 1997. They have been best friends ever since.

As their children — eight in total who currently range in ages between 2 and 7 — entered preschool and elementary school, Gitlin explained, "The three of us wanted to do something outside of our homes and our families. We wanted to do something together, and we

wanted to have ownership of it."

The three started brainstorming types of business they wanted to run.

"The three of us felt a real calling and a need to do something nonprofit, something for the community," Gitlin said.

A famous quote from Jewish text — "Every Jew is responsible for every other Jew" — helped them hone in on doing mitzvot for fellow Jews in the area.

Weinstock explained, "We feel so fortunate within this community... We wanted to really give back to the community."

Gitlin added, "We felt a responsibility to the Jewish community."

With the pro bono help of Shipman & Goodwin LLP, they filed the 501 (c)(3) paperwork with the state to make Deeds for Needs a government-recognized nonprofit organization.

"We just felt that unless it was set up as an official business that we wouldn't have a lot the resources that we now have being a tax-exempt organization to really help the people we wanted to help," Gitlin said.

With many nonprofit Jewish organizations in the area, Deeds for Needs aims to serve as a resource for Jewish agencies that come face to face with the great needs in the community but recognize their own limits when it comes to funds, time, staff and volunteers.

"We found really working with these agencies has made it a lot easier to help find people in need but also to give them some measure of comfort with confidentiality," Gitlin said.

Deeds for Needs has already worked with Jewish Family Service of Greater Hartford to obtain furniture for a single mother who escaped an abusive home with her three young children. Now living on her own, she had no bed on which to sleep, and she and her children ate meals off a child-size table. Through networking, Deeds for Needs found people and businesses that could help.



Robin Fierston, Stephanie Gitlin and Melissa Weinstock are the founders of Deeds for Needs, Inc.

Fierston said, "Our community is incredible. We have all kinds of resources within our community, and the generosity has been wonderful."

Deeds for Needs contacted Bob's Discount Furniture, which donated a gift certificate to help furnish the family's home. In addition, a mutual friend who was moving donated a kitchen table and chairs.

"One thing we've found through this experience so far is that there's always people in need and there's always people who want to help other people," Gitlin said.

Another JFS client had MS and was bedridden. She wanted to stay connected to the outside world, and her only option was through the Internet. But she was unable to use her desktop computer. A laptop computer was on her wish list. Weinstock talked to her husband, who works for Oxford Health Plan, and his compa-

ny donated a laptop and software for her. When the client e-mailed Deeds for Needs a touching letter of thanks, Weinstock said, "Just immediately it felt like all of our meetings and all of our efforts were immediately worthwhile."

The founders' current goal is to maintain a viable and respectable organization that helps Jews in need in the community.

"If it grew beyond West Hartford, that would be great," Gitlin said.

Weinstock added, "It's incredibly gratifying and I consider us a success right off the bat."

For more information, Deeds for Needs, Inc., can be reached via e-mail at deedsforneeds@comcast.net.

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