

New school gets start

More than 230 donors, parents, faculty, board members, students, parents and grandparents came to Vancouver Talmud Torah on Sunday, June 22, to mark the groundbreaking for the expanded and revitalized school.

With white chairs set up on the soccer field and students (and pre-students) playing in the playground behind a makeshift podium, VTT students Charlie-Ben Glassman (Grade 5) and Ben Bogdonov (Grade 6) opened the proceedings by leading the assembly in renditions of O Canada and Hatikvah on clarinet and saxophone.

Head of school Cathy Lowenstein welcomed everyone and gave a brief update on life at VTT. Among the highlights, she celebrated the 59 students graduating this year from VTT and reported that student enrolment for next year is strong across all grade levels and student retention rates are higher than VTT's historical average. She also spoke about the physical-education program for next year, noting that it will have enhanced programming using the gym and track facilities at Douglas Park Community Centre, the pool, gym and racquet courts at the Jewish Community Centre of Greater Vancouver and two mini soccer fields, which are being prepared on land VTT has leased from Beth Israel atop the new, shared BI-VTT underground parkade.

Lowenstein wished Rabbi Matthew Bellas well in his new role at Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Baltimore, and shared plans for the 2014-2015 VTT Judaics program, which will be led by existing and new faculty with the support of several rabbis from across the community.

Finally, she spoke of what the expanded and revitalized school will mean for students: 12 new classrooms; two new gymnasiums, with the flexibility to be combined into a performance space; a rooftop playground; a new learning commons; a kosher cafeteria; and ample space for teachers and students to work collaboratively.

Campaign co-chair Dan Pekarsky began his remarks by saying, "We are well on the way to the final proof of delivering a modern, 21st-century school for the benefit of our children and our community." He thanked the Gordon and Leslie Diamond family for "shining the brightest of lights to lead our way with their extraordinary gift that propelled us forward," as well as other major donors, including the Glassman family, the Segal family, the Cristall family, the Porte family, Gerry Biely, the Ben and Esther Dayson Charitable Foundation and a young family

in the community who made a major gift to the campaign but wished to remain anonymous.

Pekarsky recognized Ari Shiff, the campaign's honorary founding chair, for being a catalyst in getting the campaign started, along with Andrew Abramowich and Geoff Glotman for leading the building committee; Allan Beron, Susan Quig and Brian Chelin for overseeing the campaign's finance portfolio; Josh Pekarsky for managing campaign communications; Lowenstein and her team; and Alan Shuster, campaign co-chair. He thanked Jody Dales and Sue Hector for their work co-chairing the campaign's fundraising committee, and gave Dales special recognition as she now steps down from the campaign having accomplished what many thought couldn't be done: getting the campaign over the \$20 million mark.

Shuster took the audience back to the campaign's formal launch in May 2012, when it was determined that the core belief would be that the campaign was not about a building, but about a school and a community and a strong and sustainable future. He also thanked all of the donors and volunteers, including Megan Laskin, Belinda Gutman and their committee for staging the event, complete with 240 individually wrapped kosher marshmallow treats with handwritten notes saying "Todah Rabah!" He thanked Dan Pekarsky, who "really didn't have to do this, but did it willingly, from his heart and with great commitment and sage advice."

Shuster closed with a campaign summary and update:

"Putting these shovels in the ground is monumentally important – to VTT and to our community. But it is only a means to an end. And that 'end' is a strong and vibrant Jewish day school that is excellent in every way, that can meet the needs of our community, and that can maintain financial stability and sustainability for generations to come.... As far as the campaign goes, your support has enabled us to proceed with construction of an expanded and revitalized VTT. But, as you know, we still have a ways to go. When you cut through all of the numbers, between what's been

raised, what's been invested to date and what's needed to finish the job, we will need to raise between \$6 million and \$7 million depending on how we do with the final construction and financing costs. So, if you haven't given yet or if you were holding back part of your gift, perhaps because you weren't convinced the campaign would succeed, now is your opportunity. If you have already made a pledge, *thank you....* At some point, we will come back to the community to help us 'burn the mortgage' and finish the campaign. But, today, we are here to celebrate, to say thank you and to mark this momentous occasion in the history – and for the future – of VTT."

At that point, the Diamond family joined Pekarsky and Shuster to turn the first shovels, marking the beginning of the next phase of the journey. This group was joined by Lowenstein, Shiff, the campaign leadership and VTT board.

When they were finished, the real experts took over and about 30 VTT preschoolers and their junior apprentices attacked the mound with plastic shovels, glee and determination while architects Mark Ostry and Alex Percy of Acton Ostry, and general contractor



Above: From left to right, taking part in the Vancouver Talmud Torah groundbreaking ceremony on June 22, are Leslie Diamond, Ava Abramowich, Laurie Glotman, Gordon Diamond, Jill Diamond, Alan Shuster, Ari Shiff, Dan Pekarsky, Andrew Abramowich and Barry Glotman.



Right: Rabbi Matthew Bellas blows the shofar.

Roland Haebler looked on.

After the formalities, the crowd lingered for more than an hour over coffee, lox, bagels and the sounds of children playing. ■

— Courtesy of Vancouver Talmud Torah

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been in rock bands taught me how to bend the strings properly and I began specializing in playing lead guitar – something very few girls were doing when I was a teen.

"I played constantly and learned everything I could figure out by Heart, Aerosmith, Yes and Led Zeppelin, but I also started writing my own songs and performing in coffeehouses. By my early 20s, I was making a living as a full-time professional guitarist and, other than recovering from a hand injury, I've never stopped playing. I feel strongly that we need more female electric guitarist role models and I volunteered as a guitar instructor for Vancouver Girls Rock Camp in 2012."

And what draws Newman to the blues? "It's the raw emotion and the simplicity of the music that grabs me," she said, reiterating, "I've had a longstanding love of the electric guitar and, when I first began listening to blues players like Freddie King and Eric Clapton, I was blown away by the expressiveness of their playing. In recent years, I've been focusing a lot on slide guitar, which has a range of expression that emulates the human voice and beyond. There's nothing more soulful than

Roy Rogers playing slide guitar on Elmore James' song 'The Sky is Crying,' or almost anything by Ry Cooder or Derek Trucks."

Part of the fun of the Cottage Bistro CD release party – in which she was accompanied on stage by Loren Etkin on drums and Brian Scott on bass – was the seemingly spontaneous invitation by Newman for her daughter, Michelle Baynton, and Cecile Larochelle to join her in a couple of the songs they each performed with Newman on *Lovestruck Blues*.

"One of the things that was the most special about making this new CD," Newman admitted, "was getting a chance to record with my daughter, Michelle. She's just finishing her opera degree at UBC and, despite my doing a very different style of music, we get a lovely vocal blend together. Michelle sang background vocals on my songs, 'Everything Will Change' and 'Without You.'"

Newman, along with Etkin and Cameron Hood (bass), will perform next on July 14, 9 p.m., at Guilt & Co., 1 Alexander St., in Vancouver. For other upcoming performances, keep an eye on jillnewman.net, sign up to receive email updates or like the Jill Newman Blues Facebook page.

PICKLES Baby Beaver



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