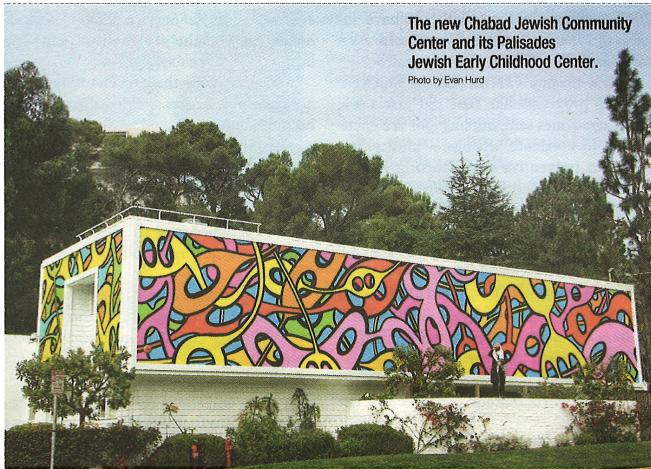


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COMMUNITY



The new Chabad Jewish Community Center and its Palisades Jewish Early Childhood Center.
Photo by Even Hurd

New Chabad Center Brightens Up Palisades

by RYAN E. SMITH, Contributing Writer

Members of the Chabad-Lubavitch Orthodox movement may be known for their traditional black and white clothing, but they've brought a splash of color to Pacific Palisades with the new Chabad Jewish Community Center there and its Palisades Jewish Early Childhood Center.

With one building wrapped in a bright, multicolored abstract mural by artist Ed Massey, the facility on Sunset Boulevard at Los Lions Drive represents the end of years of searching for a permanent school location, during which the organization at times butted heads with neighbors and the Getty Villa.

"We can finally call this our home," said Rabbi Zusha Cunin, CEO of Chabad of Pacific Palisades. "It's the story of 'Gam Zu Le'Tovah' — this, too, is for the best."

Resting on 2.5 acres within shouting distance of the Pacific Ocean, the new campus once was owned by the J. Paul Getty Trust and used as offices until 2008, after which it sat vacant. It was acquired for \$5.6 million by a Chabad supporter who wishes to remain anonymous, and it was turned over — along with the mortgage — to the organization in July. A school for children between the ages of 2 and 5 opened last month.

The property includes a 7,000-square-foot main building and two other structures that combine to offer 6,000 square feet of additional space. Eventually, Chabad will move everything but its shul from its present location, which is also on Sunset Boulevard.

Some of the property's top attributes are its natural ones, according to Cunin. There is a path leading up a steep hill that cuts through the woods and past a long, man-made creek

and waterfall. There is also access to hiking.

"This is really a gift of nature to our students," said Barbara Leibovic, director of the early childhood center.

Not only will it be incorporated into the school's curriculum through hikes and gardening, but also nature has literally found a way into the classrooms, where tree branches are suspended from the ceiling.

The school currently has 20 students. Administrators hope to boost that number to 30 children by the end of the year and then, eventually, 60.

"We have a tremendous future here," Leibovic said. "We have a lot of space, so we can grow."

It's been a long journey since the preschool had to move in 2007. At the time, the Santa Monica Conservancy voted to end the lease in Temescal Gateway Park, ruling that public park area should no longer be walled off to private enterprises.

That began a time of uncertainty. The preschool became home-based while numerous replacements were sought and rejected, including a site near the Getty Villa's service road — a road to which it ultimately was denied access and a location that concerned neighbors. So they began looking again.

"It was obvious that that was not our future home," Cunin said. "It became the Lone Ranger against I don't know how many law firms. It's not our mission to fight legal battles. Our mission is we look to create light in the world."

Which brings him to the 120-foot-long piece of art adorning the main building's exterior. Cunin believes such a whimsical and color-

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ful facade is a first for Chabad, but he said it is perfectly in keeping with its principles.

"The idea of Chabad is absolutely about color. It's about bringing color into your life," he said.

The goal, he said, is to beautify the world, both for the preschool students and the community at large.

Massey, an L.A.-based artist whose "Summer of Color" project transformed area life-guard towers into works of public art in 2010, said he was approached to create the piece by Cunin, whom he has known for a few years. He made it off-site, using highly saturated pigmented inks on a stretched tarp.

"I immediately thought to deal head-on with preconceived ideas and perceptions of school buildings, Jewish education and Chabad, and present a visual and conceptual dichotomy — and to do so while adding a new community asset to the broader Palisades," he said.

The result is a psychedelic slew of interconnected designs flowing across the building. Electric yellow mingles with hot pink, blue and more.

"In my view, the design integrates a bright color palette, vitality, connectivity, freshness, energy, optimism and motion," Massey said. "How great if the building design and colorful hues make kids and parents look forward to going to school and starting their days, while

jazzing up commuters, passers-by, surfers, beach-goers, and nearby neighborhoods and commercial areas."

Janet Turner, chair of the Pacific Palisades Community Council, said the new home for Chabad's early childhood center seems to have worked out for all parties.

"We are so happy for Chabad. We're so happy that they have found a location that is extremely good for them and extremely good for the community at the same time."

She said it is a safe environment for the children and one where residents don't need to worry about the noise. As for the exterior artwork, Turner said there hasn't been a big outcry by locals for or against it.

"The mural is very creative," she said. "Whether it's legal, we don't know yet. The council is not worried about it." (Cunin said he was advised the art is legal because it is mounted, not permanent.)

A Getty spokesman had warm words, too: "We welcome the early childhood center to the neighborhood."

Cunin said he sees the acquisition's importance going far beyond preschoolers or passers-by. He envisions it as a hub of Jewish life, a home for after-school enrichment programs, parenting workshops, "Mommy and Me" classes, social programs for seniors, and Friendship Circle, a program that offers friendship and support for children with special needs and their families.

"The miracle is that this is such an asset that's needed in the Jewish community," he said. ●