

New York - Magenu: Empowering Safe Children Through Education

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New York - A movement to educate children about personal safety continues to gather steam, as a relatively new organization brings its award winning safety program to Brooklyn schools.

Magenu's goal is to empower children by educating them about personal safety, including what to do if they get lost, encounter an emergency situation, are the only ones available to answer the door at home or if any adult of child attempt to touch them in a way that they find uncomfortable. Additionally, the program, which is aimed at children in grades Pre-K through fourth grades, teaches children how to identify safe helpers if they need assistance.

Magenu was founded last year by Flatbush residents Eli and Shani Verschleiser after their own daughter came home from a Lag B'Omer outing talking about a friendly man she had met in a park. While the

Verschleisers quickly ascertained that their daughter had not been harmed, they saw the obvious need for yeshivos to implement safety programs for their students.

"We started looking into how the world at large deals with issues of child safety," Eli Verschleiser told VIN News. "We saw the statistics, saw how pervasive the problem is and as much as we would like to think that we are an insulated community, the problem still exists. Even if the numbers in our community are just ten percent of the statistics of the outside world, it is still a big problem."

While both Queens and the Five Towns had safety programs already implemented in their schools, Brooklyn's diverse community lagged behind.

"In Queens there is a Vaad that got together and made this happen," explained Verschleiser. "We don't have anything like that here in Brooklyn so it is much harder here. One day I came home and there must have been forty to fifty mothers in my living room, each one with kids in different schools. It was a real grass roots movement."

Magenu was officially founded in June 2012 and just two months later the Verschleisers licensed the Safety Kid program created and developed by Debbie Fox of the Aleinu Family Resource Center, a program of the Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles.

"We made some changes to the Safety Kid character to make him a better fit for Brooklyn's English speaking schools," explained Verschleiser.

Bnos Leah Prospect Park was the first of many schools to offer Magenu's safety program and to date Magenu has presented its program, which includes separate presentations to students, parents and teachers to 2,354 children, 1,056 parents and 443 teachers.

"The Magenu presentation was very informative and very eye opening," said Rabbi Moshe Friedman of Yeshiva Shaarei Torah in Brooklyn, which presented the program to boys in grades one through four. "It gave the boys more of an awareness, more of a feeling of

'now I know what to do'. It brings to the table a lot of things that people take for granted and don't normally think about."

The ability to present information in a non-threatening way to even the youngest students was extremely beneficial, according Mrs. Michelle Scholar, preschool director at Lev Bais Yaakov in Sheepshead Bay, which also took part in the Magenu program.

"This is an excellent, age appropriate program," reported Mrs. Scholar. "It was created in a way for them to see, understand and participate. How to not put yourself in a potentially dangerous situation and what do if it occurs anyway. The children were given definite rules on how to handles these situations."

Mrs. Scholar praised Magenu for taking on the issue of personal safety.

"This opens up your eyes and makes it very clear that this is a topic that cannot be kept in the closet anymore. Magenu has created an awareness that the world isn't such a safe place anymore and that we have to be prepared to deal with these situations."

Parents have been very receptive to the safety initiative according to Eli Perlman, a social worker at OHEL, who presents the Magenu program to parents, teachers and school administrators.

"Parents already have basic parenting skills that they likely got from their parents, but this is an additional step for them," explained Perlman. "Parents today need to be more cognizant of what is going on with their kids, their relationships and how they are spending their time and they are required to have different parenting skills than they had in the past. By speaking with all three groups, the parents, the teachers and the children themselves, there is a certain cohesion, allowing us to better improve our childrens' safety."

In addition to the Safety Kid program which teaches the ABC's of safety, Magenu's Project Awareness has distributed thousands of postcards dealing with holiday safety in schools and Shuls throughout Brooklyn. Their recently launched comic book series provides full color stories dealing with safety issues and has so far dealt with drinking on Purim, safety on Chol Hamoed trips and confiding in trusted adults.

Magenu's upcoming Safety Day Fair, which will be held from noon to 6 PM on June 2nd in Marine Park, will be an informative afternoon featuring several local safety organizations including the FDNY, the NYPD, Hatzalah, Shomrim, representatives of the Office of Emergency Management and appearances by local politicians. The afternoon will also feature carnival rides and games, music by 8th Day and different booths addressing safety issues including summertime safety, camp safety and babysitting safety.

The Verschleisers hope to expand their program to include older elementary school grades and plan to have Magenu in place in Monsey and Lakewood next year, as well as a special Yiddish version of the program.

According to Verschleiser, there are 54 English speaking yeshivos in Brooklyn with an estimated 22,500 children in grades Pre-K through four. He hopes to bring Magenu to all of them.

"This is all about education, and empowering our children through knowledge," said Verschleiser. "This is about basic safety and protecting our kids."

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