

STATE & LOCAL

Organization helps survivors through hard times

by Johanna Ginsberg
NJN Staff Writer

With almost no overhead, Elie Rubenstein and his organization, The Blue Card, distributed \$880,000 last year to about 1,000 Holocaust survivors in need.

This year, he predicts, the group will give out over \$1.2 million. Most of the elderly beneficiaries earn \$12,000 or less per year.

Rubenstein, executive director of the New York-based nonprofit organization, will speak at Temple Ner Tamid in Bloomfield on Friday, Aug. 17, during Shabbat services. The event is free and open to the public. Services begin at 6:30 p.m.

Blue Card works specifically on behalf of poor Holocaust survivors and, to a far lesser extent, their children. According to

Rubenstein, beneficiaries receive emergency cash assistance for things like rent, dental work, and hearing aids; monthly stipends for as long as they need them; and money for Jewish holidays — three times a year, before the High Holy Days, Hanukka, and Passover, checks of \$100 or \$200 are sent to help with expenses. In addition, Blue Card offers the beneficiaries a fully paid week-long vacation in the Poconos and provides for the installation and maintenance of medical alert systems in people's homes. The organization also covers psychological therapy for second-generation individuals in need and when appropriate.

Blue Card funds come from private donations; it keeps its overhead low by relying on Jewish Family Service organizations around the country to screen and



Elie Rubenstein, executive director of The Blue Card, an organization providing aid to needy Holocaust survivors, will speak at Temple Ner Tamid in Bloomfield on Friday, Aug. 17.

Photo courtesy Elie Rubenstein

refer applicants.

Of the 160,000 Holocaust survivors in the United States, 80,000 are needy, according to Rubenstein. He has 30 people on his waiting list, but worries that there are many more who need help.

German origins

The Blue Card was originally established in Germany by the Jewish community in 1934 after Hitler came to power, said Ruben-

stein in an interview. "People started losing their jobs; their businesses were confiscated. People didn't have money to live, and people who wanted to leave didn't have the money for the fines and permissions involved." Blue Card formed, and Jews went door to door collecting for the most needy among them. Its name came from its grassroots origin. "There was no computer for record keeping," said Rubenstein. Instead, donors

received blue cards that were stamped by fund-raisers. "Three days later, when the next person knocked on the door," he said, donors could say without guilt, "I gave already," and show their stamped blue cards.

The Blue Card was reestablished in the United States in 1939 to help new Jewish immigrants. After 1945, it began to focus on meeting the needs of arriving Holocaust survivors.

While Rubenstein believes the organization will be needed for the next 10-15 years, he acknowledged he does not know what will happen after that. In the meantime, he said, Blue Card is also helping a small number of people of the second generation who are in need of serious psychological help stemming from their parents' experiences.

At Temple Ner Tamid, he has a twofold agenda. In addition to raising money, he said, "it's most important to let as many people know about this organization as possible. If people know a survivor who will benefit, we want to help. Our biggest frustration is when we come too late, when a person is not known to a local social service agency and the person quietly struggles when we could help."

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SPARS

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Marc Stern, codirector of the American Jewish Congress' Commission on Law and Social Action, said the case raises a "complicated question" for churches and synagogues alike: Is the pavilion a church or an ordinary public meeting place?



Marc Stern, codirector of the American Jewish Congress' Commission on Law and Social Action, said the case could "affect every Orthodox synagogue in New Jersey."

Stern said if the pavilion "is used as a church sometimes or a place where church activities and weddings sometimes take place, then I think the church has a very strong case. But if the Civil Rights Division still holds it must be made

available for same-sex ceremonies, then that is going to affect every Orthodox synagogue in New Jersey, and that would be a great intrusion of government into the autonomy and the rights of churches. It would in effect be outlawing the religious views that don't accept homosexuality as acceptable."

Stern said his organization "would not get involved at this stage" in support of the Methodist group's action.

Lee Moore, a spokesman for the Civil Rights Division and the New Jersey Attorney General's office, declined to address issues of whether the couple's intended wedding venue was public or private property.

"Those are questions we can't comment on," he told NJN. "They are all relevant to this case, and we don't discuss these things because we are enmeshed in the case."

But he said the federal lawsuit would "not at this juncture" affect the couples' discrimination complaints. "The process is what it is. What the division is doing is moving forward and at this juncture, there is no impact in that process from the filing of a lawsuit."

Rabner's ruling

What could bolster the CMA's case is a finding earlier this year by then state Attorney General Stuart Rabner.

Last February, the state bill providing for civil unions came into effect.

In an advisory a month earlier to the state registrar of vital statistics, Rabner, now chief justice of the NJ Supreme Court, concluded that members of the clergy may legally decline to perform civil union ceremonies if doing so would conflict with "sincerely held religious beliefs."

In the meantime, Paster and Bernstein are making alternate plans for their commitment ceremony. They lament, in Paster's words, that "this lawsuit has been hurtful and disruptive to the town."

Founded in 1869 as a summer retreat for practicing Methodists, Ocean Grove has in recent years attracted a more diverse population, including sizable numbers of gays. The CMA's municipal authority was nullified in a court ruling in 1981, and Ocean Grove is now part of Neptune Township in Monmouth County.

"The community became very upset — the gay community and some of the religious community — Methodists, non-Methodists, Christians, Jews, everybody," Bernstein added. "A lot of people, gay and straight, were outraged. At some point we made a decision that we had to stand up for them."

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