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Bark mitzvah raises funds for school shooting victims' families

By **SERGIO CARMONA** JEWISH JOURNAL |
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Cantor Debbie Hafetz holds a stuffed Torah behind Mordi the chihuahua as Yolande Wijtenburg looks on during the dog's bark mitzvah celebration at JAFCO's Illuminate Ballroom in Sunrise. (Elissa Brown/Courtesy)

Jewish Adoption and Family Care Options' Illuminate Ballroom in Sunrise was filled with dogs and their owners who gathered to celebrate a bark mitzvah celebration for a 13-year-old chihuahua named Mordechai, or Mordi for short.

The coming of age ceremony, similar to that of a traditional bar or bat mitzvah, featured music, dancing and treats for humans and dogs. Gift donations for Mordi's mitzvah project raised money for the Eagles' Haven Wellness Center, which is powered by JAFCO, to train 17 therapy dogs for the families of the victims who died during the 2018 Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting.

Elissa Brown, Mordi's owner who decided to give her dog a bark mitzvah celebration, said, "Over the past 13 years, Mordi has been my constant companion."

"He has brought immeasurable joy to my life," Brown continued.

Brown noted, "I am so grateful to JAFCO for helping us throw an outstanding celebration at Illuminate."

"Friends, family and dogs ate, danced and laughed the evening away," she said. "Cantor Debbie Hafetz [of Ramat Shalom Synagogue in Plantation] officiated the ceremony. Cantor Debbie provided a beautiful service with music and prayer. She truly embodied the love and companionship so many people share with their dogs."

Brown continued, "Mostly, I am grateful for the generosity of our guests and, even strangers, who donated to Mordi's Mitzvah Project to underwrite the training of 17 therapy dogs at Eagles' Haven Wellness Center, for 17 families deeply impacted by the Marjory Stoneman Douglas tragedy."

Eagles' Haven opened in March 2019 in efforts to rediscover wellness and restore hope in the Parkland/Coral Springs community following the tragic shooting. It provides wellness experiences, crisis support, case management, trauma education, support groups and access to therapy, free of charge.

Hafetz said regarding her experience officiating the bark mitzvah, “At first, I was concerned that the ceremony would be considered sacrilegious but when Elissa, Mordi’s mom, explained the *tzedakah* being given to JAFCO and to train support dogs for the Parkland families who lost a child in the shooting, I was all in.”

“Having never officiated at such an elaborate bark mitzvah, I needed to prepare an original ceremony,” she continued. “I did quite a bit of research and decided to combine some of the traditional BM rituals, such as marching with a stuffed Torah with readings focusing on Judaism’s commitment to the kind treatment of animals. The highlight of the ceremony was hearing stories about the incredible work being done by emotional support dogs from the man who trains the dogs and takes them out into the community.”

Hafetz said all the invited guests had a wonderful time.

“I hope to officiate at other bark mitzvahs in the future,” she said. “Our pets are important and deeply loved members of our families and deserve to be celebrated.”

Michael Moran, venue manager at Illuminate, said, “Illuminate was proud to have our Mordi as our first bark mitzvah ever.”

“As a dog lover myself, I was so happy to attend the service and witness the respect that the Jewish religion has for animals and see the love and respect our JAFCO donors have for animals as well as children,” Moran continued.

“We are so grateful that the dogs all got along, and the people too, and for all of the donations that came to JAFCO for Mordi’s mitzvah project which is raising money to train 17 therapy dogs for the 17 victim families of the MSD school shooting to accompany them to the sentencing trial coming up this year.”

Sarah Franco, JAFCO’s chief executive officer, described Illuminate as a venue for a cause.

“One-hundred percent of the proceeds from the rental of this \$3 million state-of-the-art gorgeous modern venue goes to fulfill JAFCO’s charitable mission,”

Franco continued. “You decide what you’d like to support: caring for children who have experienced child abuse or neglect, those who have autism and other developmental disabilities or those who have experienced the trauma of a school shooting.”

Franco added, “We are so grateful to Elissa for hosting the bark mitzvah at JAFCO and to think that her dog Mordi is now a philanthropist, raising nearly \$2,000 for the training of the 17 therapy dogs needed for the sentencing trial for the MSD shooter.”

Visit jafco.org/mordi or call 954-749-7230 to donate to help raise money for the cause.