

Growing Strong

Jewish Congregation Awaits New Home

By Maria Glod
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When Rabbi Jason Miller hosts theology discussions for members of Loudoun Jewish Congregation these days, there's barely enough room for everyone in his cramped Leesburg office. He can't teach in the main room of the congregation's storefront space because the children have religious classes there

For Miller, these Sunday mornings have become a symbol of two blessings -- the growth of his fledgling congregation and the promise that within a year, those classes and services will be held in Loudoun County's first synagogue, now under construction in Leesburg.



Rabbi Jason Miller reads to Melissa Meyers, 6, left, Rachel Long, 4, right, and other young members of Loudoun Jewish Congregation. (Barry Memberg)

"We start off the class offering a prayer that in a couple months we'll have more space and how it's a blessing that there's not enough space now," Miller said. "I see nothing but growth."

Loudoun Jewish Congregation, one of two Jewish congregations in the county, began in 1995 with a series of informal get-togethers. Now about 80 families strong, it is about to take a major step by replacing its Cardinal Park Drive storefront with a permanent home.

As the congregation celebrates Hanukah, the Jewish festival of lights, several members said it was an especially exciting and special time to be part of LJC. The close-knit group, which has come together for services, movie nights, pool parties and children's play groups, anticipates praying, learning and socializing in a building that will serve the congregation for decades.

"In Judaism, we can make any location a sacred place, but there's something very real and symbolic about seeing a synagogue being built," Miller said. "We put a lot of faith in our prayer services and our educational services, but we also have to put an importance in bricks and mortar. They are making a religious home for their children and their children's children."

Dan Tully, a master builder and architect who lives outside Middleburg, designed the synagogue, which is rising on a 9.7-acre site on Evergreen Mills Road. It will consist of three hexagons, one of which will be the sanctuary. The others will include space for classrooms, offices and social events.

For Tully, who has designed college sports arenas nationwide, the synagogue is a project close to his heart.

Tully and his wife, Judy, moved to Loudoun from Ireland about five years ago. He was a non-practicing Catholic but began attending services at Loudoun Jewish Congregation with Judy, who is Jewish. Eventually, he decided he had found a home in the faith and the congregation, and about two years ago, he converted.

"I want it to feel as if you were going to services in your living room," Tully said of the synagogue. "I want a feeling of intimacy and comfort. There's something ancient about its appearance and something contemporary. It's that mystical marriage between the old and the new that will make this a special place."

The \$3 million project is being financed largely through a donation from Irwin Uran, a multimillionaire investor who lived in Leesburg in the late 1990s. Completion is expected next September.

Over the years, Loudoun Jewish Congregation has met in public spaces, including Douglass Community Center. In recent years, the congregation has rented space in a commercial building on Cardinal Park Drive.

Sherri Hodies, who has been involved with the congregation for about two years, said she found friends and faith in the congregation. Now she is looking forward to moving into a permanent religious home.

"It's so exciting to be a part of this from the ground up, to have a chance to see the synagogue being built," Hodies said. "It's going to be totally amazing to be the first ones to walk in and sit in the sanctuary and walk on the floor."

"It will be nice to have our own space," she said, "our own house of worship."