



STILL FLYING HIGH— Project Inspire's Shabbat Retreat for the Body and Soul leaves attendees on 'Cloud Nine'

BY CHAYA SILBER

There was an RV parked in the driveway of the enchanting Woodcliff Lake Hilton, which hosted more than 900 attendees at the recent Shabbat Retreat, on November 15-17. It was only on Shabbat itself that I learned what the RV was all about, and the all-encompassing concern for a fellow Jew that it represents. The excitement for this weekend was so high, and the demand so great, that every single room in the entire hotel was booked weeks before the event!

An email was sent to attendees by a Project Inspire staff member, who had been forced to decline dozens of potential attendees due to lack of room. Yet there were some couples he simply couldn't turn away--- because they had never experienced a real Shabbat before.

The Vingers from Toronto, who had booked a room well in advance, answered the call, and graciously agreed to give up their room so that their brothers and sisters could have a taste of what Shabbat was all about! Ultimately, Project Inspire arranged for an RV so that the Vingers could come and join as well.

This, in a nutshell, is what Project Inspire is all about. The camaraderie, the incredible spirit of unity permeated the atmosphere, from the grand Challah bake on Friday afternoon, to the powerful closing address by Rabbi Shlomo Farhi that crystalized the essence of the weekend.

Project Inspire, a program of Aish HaTorah, has become a household name. Their mission, of course, is to empower Jews living in religious communities to reach out and share their Judaism with their less connected neighbors, co-workers and fellow Jews. The quality and breadth of the speakers, the caliber of the attendees, and the dedication of the Project Inspire team, pale in comparison to the power of their vision.

The Body and Soul Shabbat Retreat, timed to coincide with The Shabbat Project, a worldwide celebration of Shabbat that was the brainchild of Rabbi Warren Goldstein of South Africa, created new friendships and solidified existing ones, reaching across 'party lines' and circumstances, bringing people together from diverse communities, uniting almost one thousand Jews in a celebration of Shabbat as only Project Inspire could.

Just walking through the three crowded dining rooms during the lavish Friday night meal, ably catered by Chap-a-Nosh catering, crystalized those emotions and brought the message home.

What are the chances that the following people would be sitting together at one table, sharing their life's adventures and reminiscing like old friends, when they'd only met just moments earlier?

A couple from Queens whose children are in public school, but who are eager to place them in yeshiva. A woman from New Square with her longtime Torah study partner from Long Island. A young family from Philly with two adorable children, whose ancestors were among the Founding Fathers of the City during the

Revolutionary War. A sweet young woman from East Brunswick who'd briefly lived in Lakewood, and an elderly man from the Hamptons, who came for Shabbat with his devoted daughter. Each table had its mix of Jews of different backgrounds, all sharing their life experiences, spending a memorable Shabbat together. There were so many eclectic friendships that sprung up over the Shabbat tables at the full-to-capacity dining rooms. And the atmosphere—what spirit and enthusiasm! The Traveling Chasidim, who graced the weekend with their beautiful melodies, didn't stop singing and harmonizing all Shabbat long.

From the poignant Friday night prayers to the Shabbat morning prayers and Saturday night concert, their crowning glory was the Carlebach-style havdalah, during which the audience erupted into a spontaneous dance of the spirit, breaking barriers and cementing our soul connections. The Saturday night cookoff, hosted by celebrity chef Jamie Geller and sponsored by kosher.com, had the audience pumped with anticipation and enthusiasm.

There were so many heartwarming moments during the Shabbat—too many to count. Noticing so many young teens eager and interested in the prayer services and speeches; meeting longtime learning partners who, after years of learning by phone, are finally spending Shabbat in person; having a young woman approach a volunteer and ask for help in washing her hands and making the blessing, which she'd never done before.

The stellar program, delectable meals, and upbeat atmosphere were planned to the tee by Managing Director Yossie Friedman and Director of Programming Yaakov Giniger. More than that, the Project Inspire team knows it's about the passion we all share, the determination to make a difference, to reach out to our neighbor down the street, our co-worker in the next cubicle, the man who comes to mow our lawn or deliver our paper with a wistful expression on his face.

As Mr. Allen Isaac Gross, who, along with his wife Edie, are the generous sponsors of this outstanding weekend, expressed, "We more than accomplished all we set out to do. The achdus and excitement of all 900+ people who attended the weekend was exhilarating. It was unbelievable to watch everyone's faces, especially during havdala!"

Director of Project Inspire Rabbi Chaim Sampson, whose overflowing love for his fellow Jew radiated through the weekend, echoed these sentiments saying "It was such an incredible weekend, seeing so many people from diverse backgrounds coming together to learn, to grow, and even share what they learned and what they know. So many attendees brought people they met to share and experience Shabbat for the very first time! I have heard so many people over the weekend who were so incredibly moved and who can't wait for more."

Perhaps the uniqueness of the weekend was crystalized by Project Inspire Board President Dr. Stuart Hytman, who explained, "This event was unique to any other outreach event in the world where half the people are inviting the other half. No other event like this has such tremendous lay activism, such intense interest among the attendees, who want to reach out and grow, to accomplish more and more. We are truly one nation with one soul!"

