

# Coronavirus-closed Ormond Hebrew school serves family fun with kosher drive-thru cookout

By Chris Boyle

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ORMOND BEACH — It's been more than six weeks since Selena Bowe last saw the smiling faces of the children at Chabad Esformes Hebrew Academy — closed down, like all schools across Florida, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

So, cars, minivans, SUVs and one bicycle with a tow-behind trailer lined up outside the entrance for Tuesday's Quaran-Dine Happy Hour drive-thru cookout, Bowe stationed herself front and center.

To each family, she delivered a package of face masks, as well as a message on behalf of the entire staff.

"We miss you," Bowe said.

[SPECIAL REPORT, Life in a Pandemic: How your neighbors are living and coping.]

More than two dozen vehicles paraded through the school's parking lot to celebrate a social-distancing block party of sorts. In addition to the face masks, families were treated to kosher beef hamburgers and hot dogs, snacks, drinks, toilet paper, bubbles, water balloons and the opportunity to see a few unique, live animals.

“It’s a joy. We look at our school like the hub of the (Orthodox Jewish) community,” Bowe said. “We are people bound by connection and unity. This is one aspect that we can’t even take part in. This is who we are.”

Those animals included a ring-tailed lemur named Einstein, and a red macaw called Basil. However, some children simply wanted to see their teachers, like Miss Amy.

Greeting each passing automobile with her precocious puppet frog Honeydew, preschool teacher Amy D’Agostino was flattered when one family called her the “featured event” for their young son.

“That meant everything,” said D’Agostino, whose students range in age from 18 months to 5 years. “I’ve been teaching for 35 years, and been here for six. If I can reach one child, let alone these guys who have been my babies, I feel like I’ve got 27 kids altogether.”

Closed since mid-March, Chabad Esformes Hebrew Academy has continued education virtually for its students, including the littlest ones in preschool. D’Agostino mixes in games and stories to maintain their attention.

Administrative assistant/creative coordinator Tami Huth and director Chani Ezagui brainstormed a way to reinvigorate the families in a time of crisis and isolation. The majority of the community’s households include at minimum of five children, Huth said.

“When you’re kosher, you can’t just go through the fast-food (chains). It’s non-existent,” Huth said. “It’s hard enough to find kosher food to cook.

Kosher foods are those which comply with the dietary standards of traditional Jewish religious tradition.

“A lot of our families are not able to get the (kosher) meats, and now they’re making breakfast, lunch and dinner for between five and nine kids. At least they had lunch with schools. We just thought, ‘Dinner’s on us.’”

Teachers and administration wanted more than to just provide a meal. They wanted to create positive, lasting memories.

Clint Clymer, the school's physical education teacher, chuckled as children reared back and pelted him water balloons through their passenger windows.

"They looked pretty good (throwing it). I'm soaked," said Clymer, a former relief pitcher at Bethune-Cookman University. "I miss the interaction with my students. There's never a day I dread coming to work."

Passion, Bowe says, drives her to remain upbeat even in times of uncertainty. It's her hope that this barbecue serves as a small reminder of what her school is all about.

"We're here not for ourselves, but for the collective — to be kind and to sew into each others' lives," Bowe said. "When everything goes bad and things go topsy-turvy, this is what (families) are going to remember."

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