



## JCRS' Special Friends Club serves handicapped/isolated Jewish youth

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A new "club" has been formed by the staff of the Jewish Children's Regional Service to remember Jewish youth who most easily are overlooked because of their social isolation. The Special Friends Club is an initiative by JCRS to remember birthdays, holidays, life-cycle events and special accomplishments of Jewish youths who are handicapped, dependent and/or socially isolated.

Although the 600 to 700 Jewish youths who are funded for scholarships by the agency during the year are selected according to financial need, enrollment in this new club is not need-based.

Members of the club receive cards for birthdays and holidays, as well as certificates for special accomplishments. Young people, for whom financial need is an issue, may receive more significant gifts, such as a Bar Mitzvah/Bat Mitzvah present of Judaica or presents during Chanukah.



The idea for such a "club" was developed by JCRS when it became clear that the growing number of special-needs Jewish youths, funded in other programs by JCRS, required the agency to address the social isolation and estrangement from Jewish involvement that some youths experienced.

"These young people may not be connected to the Jewish community because of physical, emotional or developmental handicaps, because they do not live in proximity to a Jewish community, or because financial obstacles may make it hard to participate in Jewish education, youth group or camp," according to JCRS special needs coordinator, Bonnie Lustig. Each case can be complex, with a combination of handicaps, physical isolation, family dynamics and/or limited income, which makes participation in a camp, youth group or Jewish education a real challenge.

"For example, while 90 to 95 percent of the 400 campers funded by JCRS each summer present no behavior, family or logistical problems to prevent their participation (aside from needed funding), the remaining 5 to 10 percent can be a real challenge, no matter what summer program they participate in," said Marsha Zander, JCRS camp coordinator. "Some youths are not accepted back to camp for successive years; yet, these are the youths who need camp the most. The JCRS sometimes is the only Jewish organization that has not given up on maintaining ongoing contact with these kids and their families," she added.

Special Friends club (client) participants show up in all JCRS scholarship programs. In addition to camp clients, they appear among the 70 active special-needs clients and among the 300 low-income/handicapped or hurricane-affected youth who receive annual Chanukah gift packages from the agency. Some youth live in boarding schools during the year, while others are reared by grandparents or foster parents.

JCRS is in contact with Jewish youth who live in public housing projects, isolated mobile-home parks, or military bases. Some youth are new immigrants. Many are with single parents, in intermarried families or with parents who are struggling to provide the necessary care and stability to meet their children's needs.

Participating families can be referred to local and national services, and can be connected to other Jewish families with similar challenges. In addition, financial aid is available, as needed, through JCRS scholarship and subsidy programs. As in other JCRS programs, the goal of the Special Friends Club is to give each child a sense of inclusion in the Jewish community, so that each can feel supported to reach his/her potential and feel valued as an individual.

To enroll, contact the JCRS office at 800-729-5277 or 504-828-6334 or email [bonnie@jcrsnola.org](mailto:bonnie@jcrsnola.org). Bonnie Lustig, MSW, is the coordinator of this program, but contact information can be given to any staff member.

*The JCRS serves Jewish youth in Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Texas. The main office address is P.O. Box 7368, Metairie, LA, 70010-7368, and the website is [www.jcrsnola.org](http://www.jcrsnola.org).*