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April 18, 2008

Big Business Of B'nai Mitzvah

B'nai mitzvah has grown into a big business.

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Staff Reporter

Driving down Crondall Lane in Owings Mills, the eye spots business park after business park dotting the suburban landscape. It's hard to imagine that inside one of these unassuming, warehouse-style buildings lies the studio of party planners Zozzie and Heidi, who estimate 75 percent of their business is planning *b'nai mitzvah*.

Inside the high-ceilinged, box-like structure are rows of party ideas. There are floor-to-ceiling boxes filled and labeled with such themes as sports and music. Centerpieces range from "The Simpsons" to one comprised completely of soda cans. There are wooden carts, each one dedicated to a specific event, complete with client's name, party date and materials needed for that special day.

Zozzie and Heidi are part of an industry that employs multiple vendors ranging from entertainers to decorators, photographers and videographers to caterers.

According to disc jockey Doug Sandler of Washington Talent, the cost today of a *b'nai mitzvah* can average anywhere from \$25,000-\$50,000. And in an industry that one would think would be susceptible to recession, neither Mr. Sandler nor Zozzie and Heidi have seen a downturn in their part of the businesses.

For those in the industry, it's an ongoing relationship between vendors and clients that begins two or even three years in advance of the actual party date. Mr. Sandler said he has several dozen events scheduled for 2010 and has begun booking parties into 2011.

Vendors spend hours during the week, meeting clients, answering phone calls, producing the centerpieces, developing the music selections and editing the video. Each client is different. Some want to economize and make their own decorations, hiring a company like Zozzie and Heidi to help set up. Others hire them to plan everything from helping with the catering hall to invitations and decorations.

As a vendor, it's about working with the client from that initial phone call and making them comfortable about their day. It's also about staying abreast of trends.

"Youngsters are so much more sophisticated today," said Heidi Hiller of Zozzie and Heidi. With the advent of reality shows such as MTV's "My Super Sweet 16," the youngsters get ideas they hope to incorporate into their day.

In addition, many youngsters — especially those from Jewish day schools such as Beth Tfiloh Dahan Community Days School and Krieger Schechter Day School — can attend upwards of 50 or more *b'nai mitzvah* a year. As a result, they want their party to be "unique."

In Baltimore, Mr. Sandler said he'll run into the same children weekend after weekend. "I'll have 10-15 kids at every event who might know me. I have to step out of the game to make it special," he said.

Novel Approaches

In recent years, musical entertainment has shifted away from bands to DJs and "dancers" who help enliven a party and bring guests on the dance floor.

Plasma screens and live cameras show the guests in action. There is also an increase in video montage productions, highlighting the *b'nai mitzvah* child's life, and away from the traditional candle-lighting ceremony.

Zozzi and Heidi report their biggest themes are sports, music and the beach. "It's rare that we are doing the traditional blue-and-white Judaica theme these days," said Zozzi Golden.

Several years ago, Mr. Sandler entered the novelty market, investing between \$150,000-\$200,000 in this secondary business. "I saw it done so poorly so many times, and someone was making a profit," he said. "I thought I could provide higher quality, and my clients would not be upset with anything that happened at the party. From a business perspective, I was tired of giving the profit to someone else."

In a business that has grown exponentially in the past several years, interactive entertainment is very popular, and Mr. Sandler said his Foto2Go is one of the biggest sellers. Here, photographers take guests' pictures and put them on such items as the cover of a magazine, chocolate lollipops, Marilyn Monroe's body and even shirts. The activity then becomes the party favor.

For Mr. Sandler, in some ways the traditional DJ business has gotten easier in the past decade. "Music is so much easier to get a hold of today," he said. "In the early '90s, if you wanted a certain song, you used to go to the mall and buy a record and buy 19 other songs because it was on an album, and that was the only way to get it. Now, you can download iTunes." He added that he probably spends about \$500 on music every year.

The business can be difficult. There are clients who don't always understand the amount of time that goes into a project. It is a business, and Ms. Golden said they do have to charge for their hours. Also, working seven days a week can be draining, no matter how much you like your job.

For Ms. Golden and Ms. Hiller, it helps that they are partners, which enables them to give each other time off and take a vacation.

In addition, in the past, one of the most difficult parts of the business was setting up and then returning to the party at 11 p.m. or midnight to break it down. Now, they have grown and can hire students to break down centerpieces and decorations late at night.

It's a tough business, they said, but all the work is worth it when they see their clients enjoy their special day.

Former Baltimore Jewish Times intern Jenna Blumenthal helped compile this information.

Love Of Money

The following are some average prices for planning b'nai mitzvah. This is exclusive of food costs, which can vary greatly depending upon locale and whether it's a kosher event. Other costs include synagogue fees, clothing, linens, makeup and hair.

Centerpieces: \$50-\$300

Favors: \$10 each

Dancers: \$500 each

Dance floor giveaways: \$300

Deejay: \$3,000-\$5,000

Photographer: \$2,000-\$5,000

Videographer: \$2,000

Invitations: \$600 and up

Novelty items: \$900-\$3,000 depending on the activity

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