African-American Synagogue Thrives, Is Honored With City Street Sign

EVERYONE HAS A job at Congregation Temple Beth-El.

Children announce the Torah portion each Shabbat evening. One young man plays the drums each week. Another woman sets the handwashing table with a special tablecloth, towels, flowers and fresh water.

People are very territorial about their jobs, said Rabbi Debra Bowen.

“We don’t fit in anybody’s box,” she said. “There’s nothing quite like our community.”

The predominantly African-American synagogue on Lowber Avenue in West Oak Lane certainly has an interesting history, and it has not faltered since its inception 66 years ago.

“As a result, we have six generations of individuals who are still members of this congregation,” Bowen said.

The reason for that strong commitment...
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Bower's mother, Louise Dailey, who Bowen called a "gatherer." "Mother Dailey," who was not formally ordained by a mainstream branch of Judaism, was the rabbI and founder of the synagogue. "Wherever she went, people saw her and they were able to identify her," she said. "She always just had an enigmatic spirit, and she could come in and people would relate to her."

Even children raised in the synagogue who went off to college came back to raise their own kids at BethEl. "She was able to reach people, and those people never forgot," Bowen said.

The congregation doesn't charge for membership so the precise number of people who enter its doors is unknown. But the congregation is prospering. In the past month, it welcomed three new babies (they usually get about 12 a year), something not all synagogues today can say. Then again, they don't like being compared to others, said Rabbi Earl Bowen, Debra's husband. If you had to characterize BethEl, he said, "you can't buy and sell," she said. They were told they weren't considered Jews because of their race — and this was just in the past eight years.

However, they've since been accepted in Philadelphia. The synagogue has hosted many Jewish diplomats and partnered with other congregations like Or Hadash. "People are realizing we need to stop this fight," she said. "There are so few Jews in the world — we really don't have time for fighting. Let's seek commonalities and then respect things that are different."

Earl Bowen said the struggle to be accepted in the Jewish community isn't new. In the larger context of African-American history, "we came to the country, we spent 246 years in slavery," he said. "We were converted to Christianity. Then we came out of that, spent another hundred years in legal segregation. So within that context, within the last 50, 60 years, then you start to see the evolution, and then out of that you have this evolution of black Jews. But it's all coming out of this larger, historical experience of black people."

But nowadays, African-American Jews aren't so unusual. "We can never go anywhere where we will not run into another Jew of color," Debra Bowen said. "We see somebody walking down the street with a mezuzah or Star of David or a kippah. We'll say 'Shalom' and they'll say 'Shalom.'"

Everybody has the same story: "I've always felt that there was something wrong with the stories that I was told about Christianity. I need to research it for myself. And boom, look what I discovered." That's how many members of BethEl related, including Earl Bowen, who grew up Baptist.

"There are so many of us," she added. Funeral ceremonies are packed, standing-room only. Shabbat services fill the pews. Anniversary celebrations: "You wouldn't be able to get in here." Debra Bowen's father's family was Methodist, while her mother's family was Baptist. When Dailey's father died and they buried him in the family plot, she made a discovery: "All the people had Stars of David on their tombstones," Debra Bowen said. "We were in amazement because we never heard that story."

She explained that in Dai- ley's father's era, many were rejecting Christianity as a slave religion. Dailey, the daughter of a Baptist minister, discovered Judaism when she worked for $1 a day as a housekeeper in a Jewish home.

"All the things that they were doing — the salting and koshering of meats — was taken aback that these were practices that were so familiar to her because they were things that happened in her own home in Annapolis."

With the idea that these customs couldn't just be coincidental. Debra Bowen's mother began to study Judaism. "My mother never went to bed at night without a stack of books on her nightstand, a glass of water and some potato chips. And sometimes a pickle," Debra Bowen laughed. "The more she learned, the more she impressed on us."" she said.

She passed away 16 years ago — she ordained Debra Bowen before her death — but Earl Bowen, who was ordained in 2011, said her legacy is still alive. Although they don't charge for membership, the synagogue relies on donations — which they get. The building's mortgage was paid off in its first five years by donors.

"We open the doors and people come in," Debra Bowen said. The Bowens, who live in Bucks County, spend all of Shabbat at BethEl. Their office holds a pull-out queen-size bed, but there are several other rooms, beds and showers in the building for guests. Each week is full.

"We're kind of blessed that many synagogues' light to get a minyan on Shabbat," Debra Bowen said, whereas BethEl doesn't. "Our community really can be much more of a valuable asset to the larger Jewish community." Earl Bowen said. "A lot of who we are is really a reaffirmation of black Zionism ideology."

The Bowens have been married for 18 years with a blended family of four grown sons and several grandchildren. But Earl Bowen didn't meet Debra Bowen until two years after he stumbled into BethEl one Shabbat evening.

While Earl Bowen was getting his master's at Temple University, Debra Bowen was there, too. "We've both spent half our lives in Paley Library," she laughed. Though they share the pulpit and their lives together, there's one thing that must not be tampered with books. The couple has duplicates of all kinds of books in separate shelves and home offices.

Earl Bowen likes to write in the margins, "No," Debra Bowen exclaimed. "Don't touch my books."

But one book they're proud to share is the sefor Torah they acquired from Israel in 2009. BethEl was the first "synagogue of color" to receive a Torah like this specifically written for them, Debra Bowen said, a step that took them further into the Jewish community.

They have since been cemented in West Oak Lane more literally. "One thing that my mother said to me before she passed was, 'Don't let my name rot in the earth,'" Debra Bowen recalled.

To her surprise, a congregant recently took the initiative to change the name of the 7300 block of Lower Avenue to Rabbi L.E. Dailey Way. Within a couple weeks, the sign was added without their knowledge. Many congregants are "balkistic" — some left work to see it and take pictures with it.

"This is history-making because there's no record of any other black [Jewish] spiritual leader — neither male nor female — who has ever had their name on a street sign," Debra Bowen said. "As long as that street sign's out there, her request has been granted."

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RABBI DEBRA BOWEN