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Rob Eshman

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Dream big, y'all

BY ROB ESHMAN

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Rob Eshman, Publisher and Editor-in-Chief

In synagogue last Friday night, just after her sermon, the rabbi announced she had invited a special guest in honor of Jewish Disabilities Month.

The woman next to me leaned over and whispered. "What's Jewish Disabilities Month?"

"That's for Jews who get B's in school," I said.

Kidding, of course.

But in a culture that prides itself on education and achievement, there is a tendency to overlook those children, men and women who may never fit into the straight-A, Ivy League, graduate school and away-we-go model. Our norm is pretty exceptional.

One of the most moving stories I've reported for The Journal was on Dr. Michael Held, who in 1993 founded an organization called Etta Israel to make sure every Jewish child, regardless of his or her abilities, received a Jewish education. Held told me stories of families who kept their Down syndrome children locked in the house rather than allow the community to see them.

Things have changed for the better since then. Etta Israel now offers group homes, camp and Israel experiences, and Michelle Wolf, who created the first blog on the subject, *Jews and Special Needs*, at jewishjournal.com, charts the heartening growth of programs and opportunities seeking to include and assist people with disabilities.

These programs succeed — we as a community succeed — only when we stop viewing life as a race where just a select few make it to "the top."

"What if instead of seeing life as a race," Rabbi Naomi Levy wrote in her book "Hope Will Find You," "we begin to see life as a hora?" — as a circle folk dance. "The question a person in a race asks is, How far ahead am I? The question a person in a dance asks is, How wide is my circle?"

It was Rabbi Levy who introduced the special guest at her Nashuva congregation services last Friday. The rabbi and I also happen to be married — I just call her Naomi — and our daughter, Noa, who turned 16 last weekend, has demonstrated each day the persistence and grace required to navigate the world when you aren't, in the words of her bat mitzvah speech, "all put together." But much of Noa's success is due to the circle of educators, doctors, specialists, lawyers and friends who have devoted themselves to children with special needs, and to her.

The guest Naomi introduced was a 20-year-old Jewish rapper named Rio Wyles.

Wyles, clad in rapper chic — baggy pants, T-shirt, dark shades — stood silently on the bimah as Naomi recited his story.

At age 3, Wyles was diagnosed with autism. Specialists told his mother that his thinking would never rise above the abstract. But a succession of devoted specialists — Dr. Bill Takeshita, now affiliated with the Center for the Partially Sighted; cognitive therapist Shmuel Stoch, at the Yavneh Hebrew Academy; education therapist Carol Essey and others — helped him along. Wyles is now a proud graduate of the Academy of Music magnet program at Hamilton High School in Los Angeles, class of 2010.

At the age of 8, while browsing through the bins at Tower Records, Wyles told his mother, Judith Feldman, he intended to work in the music business. Doctors had warned her to keep her expectations in check.

"Do you want to work here?" Feldman asked her son, knowing even a record store might be a stretch.

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"I want to be a rapper and own my own label," Wyles shot back. "You gotta' dream bigger than that, Mom."

Rio Wyles transformed himself into the rapper Soulshocka.

He sought music mentors — Sam Kingston, Dave Stewart of Eurythmics fame and producer Joe Seabe at PASW Music Management.

As important as the professionals and friends who helped him were institutions like Vista Del Mar and its Miracle Project — whose founder and president, Elaine Hall, brought him to Nashuva — as well as Hamilton High and Day Jams, a summer rock music camp held at American Jewish University. Wyles was the first Day Jams camper with autism to be admitted — something his mother said transformed his life. Doors didn't just open for Wyles — people chose to let him in.

Soulshocka performs along with the Miracle Project Fly Ensemble at autism-related charitable events, synagogues and elsewhere. He has a label, and a producer, Seabe. Soulshocka received the 2011 Autism Genius Award at Carnegie Hall, and a standing ovation last Friday night at Nashuva.

The two songs he performed were "We Will Prevail" and "Malfunction," with music by Seabe and the lyrics by Wyles himself.

I'll leave you with the chorus from "We Will Prevail."

*Walkin' in a straight line
and never look back.
Never surrender when you're
under attack.
Won't be easy but you gotta stay strong.
Never give up cause the road is long. ...
Somehow I know we will prevail.
We will not fail. We will prevail.
Somehow I know we will prevail.
We will not fail. We will prevail.
Somehow I know we will prevail.
Yeah.
Dream big, y'all.
Soulshocka.
I'm out.*

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Excellent piece, Rob! Thanks to those dedicated Jewish communal organizations that continue to serve the underserved, unsexy members of our community that are often ignored. On a related note, the mega-rich Cedars-Sinai Hospital has decided to completely shut down its Thallians Mental Health unit later this year. The large population of L.A. Jews whose family members require medical treatment for brain illness will no longer be served by by what used to be one of our finest charitable institutions. If you're Jewish and have a child or parent with a psychiatric health

problem, you won't find service at Cedars, unless this decision can be reversed.

Comment by Jeffrey Ellis on 2/15/12 at 7:01 pm

Thanks, Rob! it was wonderful having We Will Prevail debut in such a beautiful and sacred space as Nashuva.
to hear Prevail, as Rio would say, 'check it!' www.soulshocka.com
tweet, follow, fan, download.... and enjoy!
x his mom

Comment by judith feldman on 2/16/12 at 6:00 pm

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