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Orangetown Jewish Center marks its 50th anniversary

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ORANGEBURG - During the late 1950s and early 1960s, hundreds of young families left the Bronx and other parts of New York City to make their way to what they hoped would be a better life in Rockland.

When Bernie Schiffmiller and his wife, Eleanor, decided to make the move with their two young children, one thing attracted them to Orangetown: the beginnings of a small but growing Conservative Jewish synagogue.

"It was very important to us," recalled Bernie Schiffmiller, who moved to Orangeburg in 1961 and immediately joined the fledgling Orangetown Jewish Center. "We wanted that feeling of community."

Schiffmiller, whose wife died in 2003, has been a member of the congregation ever since.

This weekend, he will be among the congregants honored as the synagogue marks its 50th anniversary.

"We're remembering the past and celebrating the future," said Marc Levine, a Tappan resident who has belonged to the synagogue since 2002.

The weekend-long anniversary celebration will include a special Shabbat dinner, cocktail party and performance by Broadway composer Neil Berg.

For Schiffmiller, 81, and other members, it's also an opportunity to reflect on the synagogue's history and growth.

The early years of the Orangetown Jewish Center weren't easy.

It started with meetings in congregants' homes and borrowed space in the Greenbush Presbyterian Church, Schiffmiller recalled.

By 1961, when he and his family joined, it had graduated to a simple wood structure on land that once belonged to Camp Shanks across the street from where Town Hall is located.

"We lovingly referred to it as 'the shack,' " he said.

Plans were in the works to move to a bigger, permanent location on Independence Avenue, where it is now, when disaster struck. An electrical fire caused by squirrels chewing through wires sparked a blaze while youngsters were inside studying in 1962.

"The rabbi got the children out, then he ran back and got the Torahs," Schiffmiller recalled. "It was very dramatic."

It was two years before the permanent home was ready, and the congregation had to meet in space borrowed from the Orangetown Fire Department and Greenbush Presbyterian Church.

"It was a real community effort," Schiffmiller said. "It wasn't always easy; we had lots of ups and

downs."

More than a dozen years ago, Craig Scheff joined as rabbi, followed several years later by Rabbi Paula Mack Drill.

At a time when many synagogues locally and across the nation face shrinking enrollment and many are closing or merging, the Orangetown Jewish Center keeps attracting new members, Levine said. More than 400 families belong to the synagogue.

"We offer something for everyone," he said. "Young, old, we are very welcoming."

Scheff said he is looking forward to continuing that tradition as the congregation marks its second 50 years.

"We're building something that is bringing meaning and purpose to people's lives," Scheff said. "It's a great feeling."
