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Rabbi Paula Drill of W. Caldwell turns 50

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WEST CALDWELL TWP. – When Rabbi Paula Mack Drill sees the sign at her synagogue saying, “Look who’s turning 50,” she could be forgiven for not being sure if it’s meant for her or the temple.

A resident of West Caldwell since 1985, Drill who turned 50 on Tuesday, Sept. 22, will help celebrate the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Orangetown (N.Y.) Jewish Center (OJC), where she serves as associate rabbi, the weekend of Friday, Nov. 6 to Sunday, Nov. 8.

The anniversary celebrations, which have already begun, have included the burial of a time capsule, stone marker placement and tulip bulb planting. A 100 Years of Broadway dinner with auction and performance by Neil Berg is set for Saturday, Nov. 7.

Some of the other fun activities Drill has been involved with are a visit to the plaza on the Early Show on CBS-TV. This came about because weatherman Dave Price’s brother, Howard, is a Rockland County resident and congregant of the Orangetown congregation.

“Yesterday we went to the county seat and Nov. 6 was declared Orangetown Jewish Center Day,” Drill said in a telephone interview on Wednesday, Oct. 28. “So there’s been a lot of building and excitement about [the anniversary],” she said.

“This weekend I’ll be participating in every single aspect,” she said, along with Rabbi Craig Scheff, spiritual leader of OJC.

Also coming up this weekend on Sunday will be the birthday party for the synagogue with the lighting of 18 candles for good luck, standing for chai, or life. The congregation will be honoring 18 people who have played important roles in the community.

“Rabbi Scheff and I, we’re pretty playful,” Drill said, explaining that part of the fun will be a theme song for each person and a quiz game to guess why that particular was chosen.

On Shabbat this week they will be honoring two families as well as someone Drill described as “one very precious man who is a widower and everyone’s surrogate parent.

“Rabbi Scheff and I will speaking about all those people,” she said.

Saturday night is the big concert.

Her Role At Synagogue

Drill who appears to take a serious yet lighthearted approach to her work, says she and Rabbi Scheff work as a partnership and have a lot of fun working together.

They first met at Camp Ramah, a Jewish summer camp in Nyack, N.Y., not far from the Orangetown shul, where she worked while at rabbinical school. She was drawn to the community and so it was there that Drill interned starting in 2002 while she was a rabbinical student.

One of few female rabbis in a Conservative congregation, Drill has served as associate rabbi at OJC, which serves Rockland and Bergen counties and has more than 500 members, since she was ordained in 2004 after six years of study. Women have been ordained in the Conservative movement since 1985, she says.

The first female rabbi ever to be ordained was by the Liberal Rabbis Association in East Berlin in 1935. In the United States, the Reformed movement ordained its first female rabbi in 1972 and the Reconstructionist movement in 1974. The Orthodox movement does not officially accept women in the rabbinate, although a few women have been ordained in some seminaries.

"We always share everything," Drill said of working with Rabbi Scheff.

This includes conducting services, giving sermons, teaching in religious school and youth programs and adult learning in the synagogue.

Drawing on her former work as a social worker for senior citizens, she still does a lot of work with the elders, as well as hospice and hospital visits and counseling.

"I am a second career rabbi," she says.

One of the things Rabbi Drill likes about serving where she does, a 45-minute drive away, is it gives her an opportunity to remain in West Caldwell with her family while still being a "rabbi in a pulpit."

On Shabbat and holidays the family moves into Orangetown.

Where It All Began

Growing up in the close-knit Jewish community of Portland, Maine, Drill says she remembers sitting next to her grandfather on the bima (raised platform where the Torah is read) when he was president of the synagogue.

Drill graduated with honors from Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania where she says she developed a broad world-view and a passion for learning. In 1987 she completed a master's in social work from Columbia University, New York City, as well as a master's in Jewish studies from the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), also in New York City.

Drill's social work experience includes Daughters of Israel Geriatric Center in West Orange where she was recreation director from 1987 to 1993 and at the Solomon Schechter School, also in West Orange. During seven summers, she served as assistant director at Ramah Day Camp in Nyack, N.Y.

Drill said, while she found much satisfaction in her social work career, she felt a call to do more. She said being present when the first female was ordained at the JTS in 1985, was profoundly moving and opened her up to new possibilities.

At the age of 39, with the support of her husband, Jonathan, and their four young children, Noah, Sarah, Benjamin and Joshua, she returned to JTS for six years of full-time study toward the rabbinate, which she terms "a blessed sabbatical in the middle of my life."

As a rabbi, she still views the world through the eyes of a social worker, but she loves the fact that she can now add what she calls "the God piece" to her interactions with people.

"I never take off my social work hat," she said. "But now I no longer have to be objective. I can become subjective. People ask me for advice."

So now, as a rabbi, she can discuss spiritual matters and God in her counseling.

She says she loves to teach and to counsel, and endeavors to be open to the wisdom of others, from the tots in the nursery school, to teenagers and elders.

Rabbi Drill is on the Advisory Board of Women's League Outlook Magazine to which she is a frequent contributor. She also serves on the boards of Masorti Olami, Hudson Valley Political Action Committee and Helping Hands Outreach to the Homeless. She also chairs the Faith Leadership Subcommittee of DELTA (Rockland County's initiative to prevent domestic violence).

For more information about the OJC 50th Weekend contact Marc Levine at (845) 398-3646

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