ELUL STORIES
Sharing our stories, sharing lives, creating community

Elul is the month leading up to Rosh HaShanah. Each day during the month, a different Temple Beth Torah congregant will respond to the prompt:

This Inspired Me...

Opening My Eyes and My Heart
Maxine Atkins

For many of us living on Long Island, extreme poverty is an abstract idea. We know it exists but it's possible to not "see" it. We know there are homeless people on the streets of Manhattan. We see them when we exit Penn Station on the way to work, shop, or go to the theater. We know there's hunger in certain pockets in Nassau County and in the rural areas of Suffolk. Still we often think "poor" means a family of 5 in a house with 3 bedrooms and no air conditioning. We think "poor" means no summer camp. "Poor" means no custom made dress for the prom. For most of us "poor" is handled by a check to a worthy organization or a bag of groceries to a food pantry a few times a year.

I grew up in Brooklyn where 5 of us shared a one bedroom apartment. Yet I know now we were not poor in any real sense. We were never hungry and we always had our home.

When I read Regina Calcaterra’s book "Etched in Sand", and later when she came to speak to us at Temple Beth Torah, I saw Long Island poverty in a different way. I saw it in a way that I can never now "unsee". Maybe it was because she talked about poverty on streets and towns that I know. Maybe it was because I saw that there was no real "safety net" to help her and her siblings. Maybe it was because Ms Calcaterra was with us, telling it to us in her own compelling words.

This book, and this author, inspired me. Yes, I was already involved with the Back Pack Drive and HELP Suffolk but in a way that left me largely untouched. I nodded when people said "Who can possibly live in Half Hollow Hills School
District and not be able to afford school supplies." Now I know Ms Calcaterra and her family existed in the same space as people with all the material goods a family needs and yet they were invisible. I was inspired by this book and this year I hope to do more, to care more, to SEE more.

Maxine Atkins joined TBT two years ago and has gotten involved in worship and social action activities. She travelled with TBT to Israel in the spring and got to see a lot of our social action projects first hand. She was a co-chair for The Back Pack Drive this year.

Would you like to share your Elul Story for our This Inspired Me series? Please share a book, or a movie, or a song, or a TV show that left a lasting impression on you. Send your This Inspired Me to: ravsusie@gmail.com. (This theme is inspired by the fact that this month we are holding a Book Drive for the Brooke Jackman Literacy Foundation. We are collecting new children and teen books which will be delivered to children all over the NY area. Come hear the Jackman’s story on Friday, Sept 8th after services.)

If you missed any of the previous Elul Stories you can go to www.tbtnew.org (media galleries/elul stories).

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