

Everyone’s invited for arts, culture and recreation at MJCC

By KC Cowan
The Southwest Portland Post

The Mittleman Jewish Community Center has been a prominent feature along Southwest Capitol Highway ever since it opened in 1971. Its roots in Portland as an organization go back much further; last year it celebrated its 100th anniversary.

The MJCC houses a preschool and the Portland Jewish Academy, with classes through 8th grade. There’s a full gymnasium, swimming pool, therapy pool, weight room, handball courts, and a covered soccer field. There’s a cultural component as well, with lectures, classes and even the Jewish Community Orchestra.

And while all this provides a

core facility for Portland’s Jewish community, Laurie Fendel, special events program manager at the MJCC, would like you to pay a little less attention to the word “Jewish” in the center’s name, and more to the word “community.”

“The thing is, this is a community center for all,” Fendel said.

The original Jewish Community Center was once exclusively Jewish – created for Jews by Jews, because so many other clubs excluded them from membership.

Ironically, now that those prejudices are gone and Jews can join about any club they’d like to, the MJCC finds itself in a position of needing to “sell itself” a bit, to stay thriving. It wants to keep its roots firmly in the Jewish community, while offering a community center for

everyone to enjoy.

Part of Fendel’s job is to come up with cultural programs to entice people to walk through the doors of a facility they may otherwise have thought you needed to be both Jewish and a member to enter.

A glance at the flyer for the first six months of 2015 includes activities and events at the MJCC that definitely are oriented to the Jewish faith, such as the “Friday Night Lights – Shabbat Across America,” which will feature a dinner, music and entertainment, or the Purim Carnival, a traditional Jewish holiday celebration.

There are many more events, however, that have no connection at all to any religion. There’s a monthly series for women exploring topics such as career transitions, money, and looking good at any age.

A used book sale is slated for March, as are performances by the White Bird Dance Company, and a lecture by a Peace Corps volunteer.

Many of the events are free, and others ask a nominal fee, but Fendel says the important thing is you don’t have to be a member to attend. Everyone is welcome.

“I love to network with people, and bring in other organizations,” Mendel says. “My job is really cultural arts. One



Laurie Fendel, special events program manager at MJCC, stands by one of her own works of art, a fiber hanging. (Post photo by KC Cowan)



The recent remodel of the MJCC lobby creates a comfortable space to have lunch or just enjoy art on display. (Post photo by KC Cowan)

of the other programs I developed is called “Everything YAH,” which means ‘everything for the young at heart.’”

“Everything YAH” will offer baby boomers classes and lectures on everything from the joy of downsizing, to living your later years to the fullest.

March is also Jewish Arts Month. Fendel, an artist herself, will display art created by members of Ora (Hebrew for “light”), Northwest Jewish artists.

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