

New York The Jewish Week

A Show From The Heart

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As the curtain closed on "Heartbeats" at 9:15 p.m. on May 4, the three of us turned to each other with a look that expressed exactly how we felt: "We did it. Wow." Later when we counted the money we had raised and realized that we would be giving \$5,000 to Sharsheret, we knew that all our hard work and all the late nights had absolutely been worth it. Sharsheret is an organization that connects young Jewish women in their fight against breast cancer. Let's backtrack a few months. On the last day of winter break, we met at Poppy's Bagels in Teaneck, N.J., with an empty notebook and the faintest beginning of an idea. We knew that we wanted to create a fundraiser that would share the incredible talent of our school, Ma'ayanot, with the surrounding community while raising money for a cause that we all felt connected to. We knew this would take a good deal of time and creativity, but we never anticipated just how much of our effort it would entail.

We were soon to learn. The event seemed to take on a new level of purpose once we decided that all of the money we raised would benefit Sharsheret. One of the fundamental principles of tzedakah is that it is important for a person to first reach out to those in his or her own community. As students of an all-girls school located in the same neighborhood where Sharsheret is based, we felt a responsibility to extend our support to this important cause. After dedicating ourselves to the cause of Sharsheret, we chose to base the night on the idea of women coming together to support each other in times of hardship. This led us to the title of our production, "Heartbeats: A Night of Song, Dance and Connection."

Heartbeats would be an arts festival at our school showcasing the talents of the students in music, dance, poetry and visual art. We contacted Nishmat Hatzafon, a women's performing arts group from Washington Heights, who was glad to be a part of our event. Beth Selter, the director of our student choir, would also take the stage and contribute her expertise to the program.

Heartbeats was now official and everything seemed to happen in a flurry from there. Our principal, Rookie Billet, and our school administration backed us with their wholehearted support. We had a large, enthusiastic turnout at auditions and all the performers managed to keep up their enthusiasm throughout the subsequent weeks of practicing. Fifty students (approximately a quarter of our school) auditioned to sing or dance in the show and we were able to find a place for all of them.

None of us know much about dancing so we delegated a leader from each grade to select a dance team and choreograph original moves. We led the singers and divided them into small groups to learn their harmonies. With the help of devoted friends we soon had a logo, a flyer and a picture in The Jewish Standard, our local Jewish newspaper.

We sent a letter to area restaurants asking them to sponsor the event or donate gift cards for the Chinese auction. We also began to receive emails and phone calls from women in the community who wished to sponsor the event in memory or in honor of a loved one struggling with breast cancer.

Soon the pile of available tickets began to shrink while the envelope of checks and money grew thicker. Heartbeats had two ticket options: \$15 for advanced reserved seating and \$10 at the door.

We spent hours on the phone or online, sometimes staying up until three or four in the morning. Details that we hadn't foreseen seemed to spring up from nowhere. Does a sponsorship of \$100 come with two free tickets or more? What kind of microphones do we need? Where can we buy fabric for the stage design?

One of the concepts that kept us motivated was the idea we had emphasized to a Sharsheret representative the first time we spoke with her: this wasn't just going to be a fundraiser, it was going to leave people feeling something special. This influenced every decision we made through the whole process—the songs we selected (both Hebrew and English), the introductions to each act and the dozens of packets of breast cancer information that we compiled. We felt a deep connection to our cause. Driving out to the fabric store (getting lost on the way) to buy the bright pink gauze that would be draped across the stage in the shape of a breast cancer ribbon wasn't just an errand we had to take care of. Making constant emergency runs to Amazing Savings to purchase pink tablecloths, mini-easels for the art display and streamers to decorate the front lobby wasn't simply an inconvenience. Ultimately, every detail that we considered would help create a more meaningful experience for everyone in attendance.

At 7:30 p.m. on May 4 the lights in the Ma'ayanot auditorium dimmed and the three of us stepped onstage to welcome the audience to Heartbeats. Three hundred eager faces stared back at us. Many were here to watch their talented friends, all of whom wore pink ribbons on their wrists or in their hair. Some were there out of respect for loved ones suffering with breast cancer or who had unfortunately passed away from the disease.

Eillene Leistner, executive director of Sharsheret, introduced the program and discussed the Sharsheret community, followed by Mrs. Billet who addressed the audience with a word of Torah and a chapter of Tehillim. Then we watched, beaming, as our friends shared their spirit through beautiful singing and talented dancing. One teacher told us the next day that after Act I she and the other two teachers next to her couldn't keep the tears from their eyes.

The day after Heartbeats we went back to school. We attended the classes we had been cutting and we stopped staying up until 2 in the morning. Well, we still stayed up until 2 in the morning, but we used that time to study or to talk to each other on the phone about how happy we were not to make last minute revisions to playbills or slideshows. Everything went back to normal.

Nowadays Heartbeats will resurface in surprising places and bring back fond memories. As we walk down the hallways in school and see a flyer still hanging up reminding everyone to audition, we'll remember how incredulous students were about a student-run production.

When we clean out our lockers and find dozens of to-do lists from when Heartbeats didn't even have its name yet, we remember how terrified we were of looking unprofessional but how we managed to keep ourselves organized and on schedule by writing everything down.

We'll remind ourselves about the times that our friends asked, "Are you really going to be able to pull this off? What about SATs? Do you even have the time?" We always kept our eye on the ball knowing that we'd find a way.

Now we can laugh about the confused sponsors who doubted us when they realized that it was only high school juniors on the phone. We had a response for anyone who didn't believe in us, "Don't worry, we know we can do it." And guess what? We did. n

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