

A dual-faith based education

Family School teaches Judaism, Catholicism

By Crystal Yednak
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Laura Durkin grew up in an Irish Catholic family. Her husband, Brian Friedler, who is Jewish, came from five generations of cantors.

After they fell in love and married, they wanted to find a way to share both religious traditions with their son.

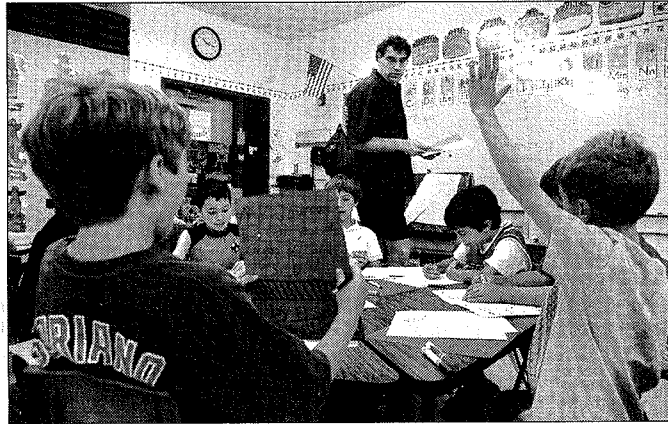
Their search led them to The Family School of Chicago, a religious education program that teaches children of Jewish and Catholic parents about both faiths.

"I had no idea we would be able to find a place where we could connect the dots for our child on who we are and where we come from," she said.

A grass-roots group of interfaith couples created the Family School in 1993 to offer a religious education program to parents who wanted their children to learn the lessons, histories and beliefs of both Judaism and Catholicism.

Now roughly 70 families are involved, and the school has graduated several groups of 8th graders after years of classes in space at Old St. Patrick's Church in Chicago.

"A lot of people are skeptical about whether it will work, and are you being authentic to Judaism and Catholicism. And I think we are. It's never meant to be the



Parent-teacher volunteer Brad Griffin-Stolbach of Chicago teaches a 2nd-grade class Sunday at The Family School, which provides Jewish-Catholic religious education classes.

be-all, end-all ... it's a launching pad," said Patty Kovacs, a school founder and college counselor at the University of Chicago Laboratory School, who wrote the school's curriculum.

The Family School was an outgrowth of a support group created for Jewish-Catholic couples like Kovacs and her husband, David. While much of the Jewish-Catholic Dialogue Group's discussion initially centered on planning wedding ceremonies, the Kovacses and other couples soon moved onto having kids and faced new challenges.

After much discussion, they created the school, bringing in the assistance of spiritual advisers including Rev. John Cusick and Rev. Thomas Hurley of Old St. Patrick's; Rabbi Allen Secher, rabbi emeritus of Makom Shalom; and Rabbi Chava Bahle of Makom Shalom.

Children in kindergarten through 8th grade attend classes twice a month on

Sunday mornings in the Francis Xavier Warde School. But the organizers stress that the Family School is not a drop-off Sunday school program. The classes are taught by parents on a rotating basis, and parents not teaching class attend an adult-education program with speakers and discussion groups.

Patty Kovacs brought in consultants and researched faith development when writing the curriculum. In 1st grade, the children learn how everyone is part of God's family, she said. By 6th grade, the students explore Judaism at the time of Jesus. In 8th grade, they move on to social justice and ethical decisions, examining social issues of their choice, such as homelessness or the death penalty.

Secher said he signed on as a spiritual leader with the dialogue group and the family school because he wanted to provide support to the

Jewish partner in these interfaith marriages.

"The tradition of many rabbis is to turn away a couple when they're involved in an interfaith relationship," he said. "If you turn them away, there's the possibility of them saying, 'I don't want to have anything to do with Judaism,'" he said.

The religions pressure parents to choose one faith for the family because "it's survival," Secher said.

But the Family School "is absolutely necessary," he said. "It is keeping the families connected to their faith roots."

At first Secher believed the children would be confused if schooled in both traditions. But when challenged by the families to present evidence or statistics, he couldn't.

And, after being involved with the Family School for a number of years, "I don't find those kids confused at all," he said. "The kids have a solid grounding."

After reading about the Family School several years ago, Herschel Kruger and his wife Maureen Chavez-Kruger decided to drive to Chicago from Milwaukee twice a month so their two children could attend.

"They weren't trying to create a new religion or combine them in any way," Kruger said. "Both Catholicism and Judaism are respected as individual religions."

Their son, Henry, 14, said the school has equipped him with the strength of both religions.

"There is no confusion or competition to choose—

there is a solid foundation that prepares me for the rest of my spiritual life," he told the audience at his graduation from the Family School last week.

Chavez-Kruger said clergy may worry about traditions being lost in an interfaith marriage. "I think it's just the opposite in my household. I'm Catholic, and I'm the one saying 'Hey, it's Shabbat,'" she said.

A number of families in the Family School belong to both a synagogue and a Catholic church, organizers said.

"The Family School isn't intended to be a family's sole religious experience; it's a supplement," said David Kovacs.

The idea has spread elsewhere. Eileen O'Farrell Smith, who also helped found the Family School, has helped create two similar religious education programs for interfaith families hosted at parishes in Mt. Prospect and Evanston.

Kovacs and other parents said the involvement in the school deepened their own spiritual connections.

"I found that I get closer in touch with Judaism because of marrying a Catholic and having to re-explain and basically teach my faith to my family," he said.

Kovacs referred to something he's heard Cusick tell the children, that "religion is a lens we use to see God. You wear one pair of glasses, and I wear another one."

"We've given these kids two pairs of glasses to see God," Kovacs said.

For more information, visit the-family-school.org.