

Bringing 'simcha'

The Barth family originally had a 10 year plan to make aliya – after talking to an emissary their plans changed to arrive to Israel in one year

• ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN

Beit Shemesh resident Susan Barth, originally of Dallas, Texas, founded and runs the marriage education nonprofit Together in Happiness (B'Yachad B'Osher), with one eye on the future and the other on the past.

"I'm really, really passionate about getting marriage education on the map here," she says. "People spend thousands of shekels on weddings, yet the couple has no preparation for marriage aside from *taharat hamishpaha* [family purity laws]. I wanted to see a vehicle for spreading the message of what marriage really entails."

The venture is in homage to her late parents, who symbolize to her what a marriage made in heaven is all about.

"When my mother died in 2007 after suffering 18 years of Alzheimer's disease, I promised her at her casket that I would make sure her name was known throughout Israel," Barth recounts. "She was all about *simha* [joy]; she was the 'hostess with the mostest,' the welcome wagon, beloved by anyone who met her. I wanted to do something in her memory that would reflect these qualities." At the time, she was taking classes at She'arim College for Women in Jerusalem and felt inspired by director Rabbanit Holly Pavlov and other teachers.

In cooperation with the all-volunteer Givat Sharett Chesed Committee in Beit Shemesh, Barth started the Simcha Gemach, a charitable lending service for weddings. One of its most popular items is a wedding guide, now in its fourth edition in English and third edition in Hebrew. All proceeds from the sale and rental of items go to local needy families.

In November 2009, in partnership with the Israeli branches of the Orthodox Union, Council of Young Israel and Rabbinical Council of America, Barth presented the first of her "Preparing for Marriage Lovingly and Wisely" forums. Some 250 people came to hear about prenuptial agreements and premarital education.

This, too, was dedicated to the memory of her parents, Feigel bat Tuvia Nisan and Esir ben Avraham Benyamin Tobolowsky. "Their marriage spanned 52 years and was built on the foundations of mutual respect, trust and communication, shared goals, love and commitment to each other and family values," Barth relates.

In May 2011, she launched Together in Happiness with the first International Conference on Marriage Education in Israel, which drew some 360 attendees. The keynote speaker was Prof. How-

ard Markman of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver, innovator of PREP (Prevention and Relationship Education Program). Through an exclusive partnership with Markman, Barth developed I-PREP, the official Israeli version of curriculum, which provides tools for better communication and conflict resolution for dating, engaged, newlywed and long-married couples.

Together in Happiness sponsors regular events, such as I-PREP "date nights" that were held at Tmol Shilshom bookstore café in Jerusalem and in Ra'anana in co-sponsorship with Ohel Ari. These have attracted secular and religious couples of all ages. Since August, four workshops have been held in collaboration with the OU Israel: a series for couples of all stages; and workshops for new parents (with babies in tow), and for engaged and newly married couples.

"We're trying to key in on all sectors where marriage should be strongly supported," says Barth, a trained facilitator and certified project management professional who is willing to lead I-PREP workshops – in English, for now – anywhere in Israel free of charge, in memory of her parents.

A celestial cheering squad

Barth and her three siblings grew up in Dallas. Her father was president of their synagogue and her mother was president of its sisterhood, though the Tobolowsky family was not Orthodox.

"I became religious through Chabad after I came back to live in Texas, post-graduate school at George Washington University in Washington. Everything I'm doing now, I do in partnership with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, although I am more *dati leumi* [national-religious]," Barth says.

After becoming more observant, she moved to New York City's Upper West Side, which is popular with Modern Orthodox singles. In 1979, she met and married attorney Alan Barth and they started their married life in Hartford, Connecticut. Their daughter, Leah, was born in 1983.

"I was extremely involved in the Hartford Jewish community, developing Federation senior housing and the Hartford Kashrut Commission," recalls Barth. "At my core, I want to unite people; it all goes back to my parents and Chabad."

The couple promised Leah that when she was seven years old they would visit Israel, and they kept this promise even though the December of the planned trip was in the midst of the Gulf War, just before Israel was attacked by Iraq. They were among the few brave souls on a Fed-

eration tour. "Everyone was thanking us for coming," Barth recalls.

"When we came back, we decided to create a 10-year plan for making aliya. I was working for a housing development company as a consultant for building senior housing in Massachusetts. I often went to Boston for meetings, and I decided to stop in at the Israeli Consulate to establish a connection with the *shali-ah* [emissary], Efraim Zinger, who is now secretary-general of the Israel Olympic Committee. He said our 10-year plan was the stupidest thing he ever heard. He told me, 'Your daughter will be 18 and she won't want to come. You need to come back here in a year.' I came home and said, 'Remember that 10-year-plan? Well, now it's a year.'"

After approaching her parents for their blessing, she worked hard to make the move happen within the shortened timetable. The family arrived in 1993 and spent nine months at the "Ritz Carlton of absorption centers," in Ra'anana. However, they then moved to Massachusetts for reasons including her mother's advancing Alzheimer's disease. Her father died of a massive heart attack on Shabbat Hanukka 1997, following seven years of attending to his beloved wife.

During those eight years in Newton and Sharon, Massachusetts, Barth kept alive the dream of aliya by telling everyone they were not staying permanently, and keeping a packed box in the living room "to remind us we were coming back as soon as Leah was out of high school."

Indeed, the family came to live in Beit Shemesh in 2003 – even though that meant Barth would need to fly often to Dallas, until her mother's death in 2007. Leah Barth got married in 2008, and lives in Efrat with her husband and daughter.

Barth says she is committed not only to her mission of marriage education in Israel but also to expanding the Simcha Gemach and its wedding guide distribution. In addition, she also produced and distributes a "Serving Our Nation" series for IDF and National service preparation, as well as a baby guide for new parents.

"My parents would have embraced every one of these initiatives," she says. "I see my parents and the Lubavitcher Rebbe looking down on this. I feel I have a celestial cheering squad up there." ■

For more information: see www.Together-in-Happiness.com or contact simchagemach@gmail.com.

SUSAN BARTH FROM HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT, 1993 FROM SHARON, MASSACHUSETTS TO BEIT SHEMESH, 2003



BARTH IS active in relationship workshops for couples, a mission she dedicates herself to in memory of her mother, who died in 2007. (Courtesy)