

# Stockton Chabad House opens doors to entire Galloway Twp. Jewish community

AVALON ZOPPO Staff Writer

Mark and Carol Cohen used to drive 45 minutes up the Garden State Parkway to attend synagogue on Long Beach Island.

That's because there was no Jewish center in Galloway Township, or so they thought.

On Sunday, Stockton University's Chabad House on East Jimmie Leeds Road installed a new sign on its lawn letting passersby know ahead of Passover this week that it's open to everyone, not just students.

The center is the only space devoted to Galloway's small Jewish community. In the past, most there traveled to Margate or Ventnor to attend services.

"The drive is long. And if the weather is bad, you don't want to go. It's good having something local," said Carol Cohen as she sat beside a Torah scroll she and her husband donated to the center.

It's not just about saving gas though, said Rabbi Meir Rapoport.

Rapoport estimates the area's Jewish population is a few hundred, and significantly smaller than the shore towns closer to Atlantic City. Only two years ago, Rapoport was searching for a permanent home for the Chabad House, when events were being held in a tiny, temporary space on a back road in Galloway.

"Until now, Jewish people living in Galloway thought, 'You know, I'm the only Jewish person in this area,'" Rapoport said. "Once they come in, they realize there are 30 people here who all live with a few minutes. We're all neighbors."

Stockton's Chabad House began in 2016 and was initially open only to students. Then, it moved to its current location, and the rabbi began fielding calls from Galloway residents asking if they could stop by.

Kayla Gutnikov, a Stockton junior, recently transferred to the South Jersey school. Attending an educational institution with a strong Jewish presence on campus was important to her.

"Since day one, I've been coming here. It really feels like a home away from home," she said.

The organization grew from a only handful of students to more than 50 people today.

On Sunday, about 10 people of all ages sat around a table chatting. A wall of Jewish prayer books lined ceiling-high shelves in the room where dozens gather before sunset each Friday until Saturday night for weekly Shabbat dinners.

For years, Smithville residents Mark Chelder and his son Elijah Gayda-Chelder attended a Ventnor synagogue. They first visited the Stockton Chabad House for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur two years ago, and have watched the organization grow ever since.

“This is much more convenient,” Chelder said. “Galloway is a very small Jewish community. We weren’t sure how much interest people would have, but we’ve been growing.”

Those interested in getting involved with Stockton’s Chabad House can email Rabbi Meir Rapoport at [rabbi@jewishgalloway.com](mailto:rabbi@jewishgalloway.com) or call 609-674-8733.