

IVDU: A Dream Realized

By Shayndi Raice



Every Wednesday, IVDU students shop for ingredients and make a different salad or sandwich for lunch. Here, IVDU student Leora Fried is shown tossing a salad.

Dr. Jeffrey Lichtman is a dreamer. One of his dreams was to create a high school that would help Orthodox young people with developmental disabilities maximize their potential and become fully functioning members of the Jewish community. With the creation of IVDU in 2000, a pre-vocational high school for girls with developmental disabilities, his dream has become a reality.

IVDU (Individualized Vocational Development Unit) is sponsored by the OU's National Jewish Council for Disabilities (NJCD). The school, which is based in Touro College in Brooklyn, New York, provides intensive social skills training and functional academics for women ages fourteen to twenty-one.

IVDU was established to fill a major gap in the education of students with developmental disabilities. In fact, according to Dr. Lichtman, there are no other educational programs—either on the elementary or secondary school level—that are comparable to IVDU.

Shayndi Raice is a public relations assistant at the Orthodox Union. She also studies modern Jewish history at Yeshiva University's Bernard Revel Graduate School.

“Our primary focus is teaching social skills,” says Dr. Lichtman, national director of NJCD and dean of IVDU. “The girls have a class in social skills every day, and the lesson is reinforced throughout the day. They also learn many life skills, from navigating the subway system to proper grooming. Our school philosophy is that social skills are the single greatest determinant of success in life—all areas of life.”

While there are public school programs for those with developmental disabilities, Dr. Lichtman feels that the programs are inadequate. “Look, for example, at the [vocational] workshops the public school system offers this population. They are in areas such as auto mechanics or baking; these careers are appropriate for those with learning disabilities, not developmental disabilities,” he says. “IVDU girls aren't going to be bakers,” says Dr. Lichtman. “They may

be capable of working in a bakery, and in some cases, even becoming assistants to the baker. But they aren't going to be the bakers.”

By teaching students about public transportation, nutrition, personal hygiene and even government, IVDU helps students become more inde-

pendent. “Knowing how to shop, spend money, use a credit card and buy a metro card can make all the difference as to whether one lives in a group home or in a supported apartment where one has support, but is far more independent,” says Dr. Lichtman. “Living in a supported apartment can also facilitate the possibility of one getting married,” Dr. Lichtman says.

“Wherever [our students] go in life, it's their social skills that will make or break them,” says Marilyn David, IVDU's program director.

“There's a reality,” says Dr. Lichtman. “If you eat with your hands, I'm not going to invite you to my Shabbat table. I'm not going to hire you if you don't know that when the door is shut, you don't burst into the boss' office.”

A student from IVDU's first graduating class is currently spending a year away from her family, learning in a spe-

cial program in Israel.

Dr. Lichtman describes Talia Forman, another success story. An IVDU student who has Down syndrome, Talia, who lives with her family in Manhattan, even voted in the

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2004 presidential election. Alan, Talia's father, says that he has seen significant changes in his daughter since she started attending IVDU two years ago. "The [school's] focus is

not on what they can't do.... It's on what they can do."

Alan hopes to be able to send Talia to Israel for a year, too. He envisions his daughter being able to live in a supported apartment and hold down a job. And Talia herself has some ideas about what she wants to do. "I want to be an author and a songwriter," she says. She loves all types of music, but has a soft spot for oldies, especially The Beatles, The Beach Boys and Ray Charles.



As part of her vocational training, IVDU student Deena Moskowitz stuffs envelopes in the OU offices.

But what's most important to Talia is being able to express herself. "I want to reach people all over. I want people to see what I'm going through." Alan attributes Talia's success to "God, Talia's God-given abilities and the NJCD."

IVDU's subsidized tuition is \$22,000 per year, a bargain compared to most other schools for such students, where tuition ranges between \$30,000 and \$35,000 a year. Moreover, whereas other high schools of this kind do not typically provide scholarships, almost no one pays full tuition at IVDU. This places a large financial burden on the school.



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Were Dr. Lichtman able to achieve another one of his dreams—to obtain government approval for IVDU—there would be less financial pressure on both the parents and the school.

IVDU's focus is not on what students can't do, it's on what they can do.

If parents could prove that the public school system cannot accommodate their child's particular needs, funding that would have gone toward the child's public school education could then be funneled toward a private school of the parents' choice—if the private school is government approved. If the private school is not government approved, the parents need to further prove that the particular school is an appropriate alternative. This process takes time, effort and money. Furthermore, even if the public school confirms that it cannot accommodate a child, it will only pay partial tuition to an unapproved school, as opposed to paying full tuition to a government-approved school.

In addition to obtaining government approval, Dr. Lichtman hopes to create a parallel program for boys. It's not for want of boys that IVDU only offers a program for girls. "If I had the wherewithal, I could have thirty boys in a week's time," says Dr. Lichtman. Ultimately, he is fairly certain that IVDU will open a program for boys. But for now, he is focusing on making one dream happen at a time.

For more information about IVDU, contact Dr. Lichtman or Marilyn David at 212-613-8376. **JA**