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## Remember Us project means they'll never be forgotten

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[http://www.jewishjournal.com/the\\_mensch\\_list/article/remember\\_us\\_project\\_means\\_theyll\\_never\\_be\\_forgotten\\_20120105/](http://www.jewishjournal.com/the_mensch_list/article/remember_us_project_means_theyll_never_be_forgotten_20120105/)

There was a moment while preparing for her bat mitzvah when Rebecca Hutman feared the occasion would not live up to its importance. She wasn't settled at a shul, and the experience was feeling kind of rote. That's when her mother, Samara Hutman, suggested Rebecca join the Remember Us Holocaust B'nai Mitzvah Project, which would send her the name of a child who perished in the Holocaust that she could recite out loud at her bat mitzvah.

"It was the first thing that felt tangibly important," Rebecca said.

Rebecca had found her hook — a way of honoring another Jewish child, Victoria Farhi, who never had the chance to read Torah because she died in the French Vel' d'Hiv roundup. Plus, the two girls had something in common: They both were born in the Parisian suburb of Neuilly, where Hutman spent the first seven months of her life while her father, production designer Jon Hutman, was working on the Hollywood movie "French Kiss."

"I could relate to this young girl who was frozen in time and feel the immediacy at this one point of my life as I was passing the benchmark at which she ceased to live," Rebecca said.

**Story continues after the jump**



She spoke about Farhi in her d'var Torah, and, in lieu of gifts, requested donations to genocide prevention programs. Along with her own \$2,000 in savings, Rebecca split the funds between Jewish World Watch and American Jewish World Service.

But something still wasn't right.

"I felt like I had taken on this obligation, and it couldn't end with my bat mitzvah — because when you say you're taking on somebody's life, that's not a one-night event."

Then something unexpected happened. After mother and daughter returned from a visit to Washington, D.C., where Samara's father-in-law had been appointed to the national board of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, they learned that Rebecca's school, Harvard-Westlake, was seeking parent volunteers to coordinate a Yom HaShoah tribute. Samara leaped onboard, and, modeling from the b'nai mitzvah project, stuffed 250 bags with the names of perished Jewish children and yahrzeit candles to distribute at the event. At the secular school's event, they ran out of bags.

Soon after, thanks to her friendship with the b'nai mitzvah project's founder, Gesher Calmenson, Samara was appointed to the inaugural national board of Remember Us, and she immediately started dreaming of what they could do next.

"My whole life, I wondered who I would have been in the Holocaust," Samara said. Would I have been a brave, righteous person? Or would I have been so terrified that I would have hidden? This was a way to approach the subject with attributes that I would wish to have."

Samara recruited four local women and their daughters to help dream up ways they could expand Remember Us.

"Here we were working on Holocaust memory, remembering children who had perished, but their peers who had survived were living all around us," Samara said.

The group created the intergenerational Righteous Conversation Project, pairing teens with local Holocaust survivors. The idea is for the survivors to share their stories with the young, who then become "vessels of memory."

Their first event was held at Harvard-Westlake last February, during which three pairs of teens and survivors appeared on stage in conversation. The model has since been repeated at IKAR and Pacifica Christian High School in Santa Monica. In June, the teens and survivors convened for a weeklong workshop about modern injustices. By its end, they had produced one program focused on acceptance of gay families and another on ethical consumerism, which they then "gifted" to both Jewish and secular organizations (the former went to Hebrew Union College's Institute for Judaism and Sexual Orientation at USC and to the San Francisco-based group Colage, for people with an LGBT parent; the latter to the Orthodox social justice organization Uri L'Tzedek and the product-review Web site Goodguide.com).

Samara now serves as the paid executive director of Remember Us, the umbrella group for both the B'nai Mitzvah and Righteous Conversation projects. And although the organization has received nearly \$22,000 in donations, they've got plans for expansion and have three grant proposals in process.

But something else is changing: Rebecca is approaching high school graduation and will soon leave home. Working together has been both "beautiful and stressful," Samara said.

"If we fight about anything, it's this," Rebecca added, "because we're both so passionate about it. We don't fight about trivial things — and this isn't trivial."

"You know," her mother chimed in, "I was talking to a Jewish donor about this, and he said, 'Why do you do this?' and I said, 'To me, these survivors are living Torah.' "