

A high-tech storyteller

Bat mitzvah project spreads the joy of books

By Elise Kigner Advocate Staff



At Gateways, Emmy, age 2, explores "Sammy Spider's First Hanukkah."

Sarah Rosenthal dreams of becoming a special education teacher - and, at 13, she is already making that dream come true.

"I've always had a love for teaching and kids" Sarah said.

For her bat mitzvah project, she contacted Gateways: Access to Jewish Education and asked how she could help. Gateways was looking for someone with computer skills and a flair for acting - Sarah fit the bill. The project: creating Power- Point presentations of Jewish children's books with recordings of the words.

"It really brings in a lot of her loves. She loves working with the computer and making Power- Points, and she loves reading," said her mother, Susan

Rosenthal, a special education preschool teacher in Marlborough.

After obtaining permission from Kar-Ben Publishing to make the PowerPoints, she scanned the books into her computer and recorded herself reading the text. Her mother helped with some of the scanning and cropping.

Sarah's first PowerPoint: "Sammy Spider's First Hanukkah," by Sylvia A. Ross, was delivered to Gateways in November.

At Gateways, toddlers to 10- year-olds have used the program. They can "turn pages" by clicking an arrow on the screen with a mouse. Students with cerebral palsy or other disabilities that impair their motor functions turn pages by clicking a button that attaches to the computer.

Though she hasn't seen any students use the PowerPoint yet, Sarah did tour Gateways the week before her bat mitzvah at Temple Beth Am in Framingham last spring.

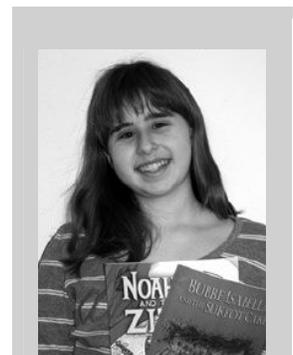
The students "can start to form some of the sounds that I've been making, [even] some of the words," she said. "It gives them a chance to look at the books themselves."

And, unlike a traditional story time, a PowerPoint lasts forever. "I felt that it was important to do something that people ... could use for a long time," Sarah said.

Nancy Mager, program coordinator for the Gateways Jewish Education Programs, said some students who cannot read books on their own "are drawn to technology and computers." The PowerPoint also appeals to students whose attention drifts when they listen to a person reading a story.

The Gateways Jewish Education Programs include Sunday classes on Jewish customs and Hebrew for students ages 4-17, as well as b'nai mitzvah preparation for children ages 11-13. Gateways has found Power- Points useful for b'nai mitzvah students. If they lack verbal skills or have a difficult time speaking in public, they can present a Power- Point instead of reading from the Torah. Family members can record themselves reading the blessings and instead of a D'Var Torah (the Torah talk) show a PowerPoint with photos of the student learning about Judaism at home or at Gateways.

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Sarah Rosenthal with books that she is turning into PowerPoint presentations.

Gateways: Access to Jewish Education www.jgateways.org