

WESTCHESTER JEWISH Chronicle

Helping people help themselves

Apprentice program at Mount Kisco bakery is just one way
Connie Milstein gives back to the community

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Walk into Connie's Bakery & General Store in Mount Kisco and your senses will be excited by the aroma of fresh baked pastries and the glimmer of beautiful giftware.

The outstanding feature of the shop, however, cannot be found in its glossy challahs, seven-layer mocha cake, hand-made wooden toys or leather bookends, but in the unique idea behind the enterprise and Connie Milstein, the woman behind it all.

No ordinary bakery, Milstein's shop, which sells kosher/dairy cakes, pies and cookies, is *tzedakah* in motion.

The bakery provides an apprenticeship program for those who have faced barriers to sustainable employment, as well as support for area farmers by using and selling their products.

In addition, all the bakery's net profits go to local and regional charities.

"After seeing story after story in the news about the terrible state of the job market and cuts in government funding to



Connie Milstein: "I've been very blessed in my life, but for me to be happy, I need to help others."

programs that serve the most vulnerable, plus learning that more than 200,000 people go to bed hungry every night in Westchester, I decided to do something about it," says Milstein, a real estate executive,

lawyer, entrepreneur, philanthropist and resident of South Salem and Manhattan.

What Milstein did was establish an enterprise where people on the verge of being homeless could learn a skill to help support themselves while earning a living wage and getting health insurance.

"Working at Connie's has helped me stabilize myself," says Jamie Jeffrey of Mount Vernon, an apprentice who works under the tutelage of pastry chef Simeon Manber, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America and former pastry chef at New York City's famed Babbo restaurant. "I was living in a shelter, but after one year here I was able to save money for security and pay rent on my own. I'm learning hands-on and ready to face anything that comes along now."

Connie's Bakery, located at 41 S. Moger Ave., also partners with local charities and provides them with needed funds to continue their work.

Among local groups that have

benefited from Milstein's largesse are WestHab, the largest provider of housing and services for those in need in Westchester, and Top Chefs Harvest, which employs homeless women.

"Connie's sells our dry bean soup mix," says Connie Elkinson, director of community relations for WestHab/Top Chefs Harvest. "What I admire about Connie is that she had a vision and saw it through."

Milstein grew up in Scarsdale in a Jewish family that valued helping others.

"My father, Seymour Milstein, was the most charitable person I ever knew," says Connie.

A prominent philanthropist, he was a member of the board of trustees of NY Presbyterian Hospital and was a benefactor of such causes as the American Jewish Committee and UFA-Federation. This year, the hospital broke ground on the Milstein Family Heart Center, a \$250 million facility that will be one of the most comprehensive of its kind in the world.

Milstein's parents were also founding members of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and were deeply involved in Temple Israel Center in White Plains, where the Milstein Sanctuary was dedicated in December 2000. Her grandfather, Morris Milstein, was long involved with Mount Eden Jewish Center, a prestigious synagogue in the Bronx.

"I've been very blessed in my life, but for me to be happy, I need to help others," she says.

Milstein is an inveterate philanthropist supporting the sciences, arts and education through establishments like NYU (her alma mater), the New York City Opera and the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In 2000, she was awarded the prestigious National Human Relations Award by UN Watch and its parent organization, American Jewish Committee. She also supports the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and UJA-Federation.

Milstein recently opened a branch of her bakery at Northern Westchester Hospital in Mount Kisco. The coffee bar serves specialty coffees, fine teas and features bakery items prepared by the apprentices from the main store. The shop also sells gourmet food items and unusual gifts. As with the main shop, special purchasing consideration is given to small farmers, craftsmen and to companies that donate a portion of their own proceeds to philanthropic causes. All proceeds will go to charity.

"It smells so good and it has changed the perception of what a hospital is," says Shirley Roman, a patient navigator at Northern Westchester.

It is also changing the lives of people in need and fulfilling the dream of a generous benefactor.

"The goal is to give back," said Milstein as she cut the ribbon for her new shop. "We give people opportunities, we train and guide and bring sweetness to the lives of others."