The Sabes JCC’s Tychman Shapiro Gallery helps artists connect and builds community

By DAVID JORDAN HARRIS

Most of us have a favorite room in our home. It might be a sun porch flooded with natural light and the best view of a long-limbed oak tree in the backyard. Maybe it’s the room on the second floor with a sloped ceiling, a comfortable red velvet chair, and a great corner for reading a book and dreaming new thoughts. Or perhaps it’s the kitchen, where creativity is on a high boil every time you walk into the space. These favorite rooms give us a place to see deeper into our lives and to stretch beyond the ordinary.

The Tychman Shapiro Gallery is many people’s favorite room at the Sabes JCC. The brainchild of Al Tychman, it was created 10 years ago to offer artists a secure, dedicated space to exhibit artwork that stems from an artist’s Jewish background or that creates ties to Jewish culture.

According to Al’s son, David, “Al believed the cultural arts were one of the key components in the JCC, along with sports and fitness and support for the very young and the very old. It couldn’t be a strong JCC without the cultural arts.”

The visual arts were hardly a new concern. RuthAnn Weiss, who had been hired at the JCC in 1970 as the director of art education and later served as its cultural arts director, brought her own passion for the visual arts and her experience as an art teacher to the job.

Gallery C, which was located on the JCC’s mezzanine, was the predecessor to the Tychman Shapiro Gallery. “Gallery C provided the community an opportunity to hear the voices of Jewish artists who had important things to say,” Weiss reminisced. “They broadened the perception of Jewish thought. You don’t just have to go to a synagogue to encounter a Jewish feeling or Jewish thought.” Work by significant locally based artists, such as Harriet Bart and Stuart Klipper, was displayed, as well as art brought in from other American cities and Israel.

The space that became the Tychman Shapiro Gallery had been an artist lounge. Weiss had hung photographs and small prints in the room, but it was a multi-use facility. When the Tychman and Shapiro families made their gift that brought the new gallery into existence, there was still a missing component.

Supported by the JCC’s cultural arts committee, artist Robyn Stoller Awend was hired as a full-time curator of the space and its curator. Since then, she has curated more than 100 exhibits, each of which has been a “best day” for Awend. “I’ve had the opportunity to create a work of art that can speak to the community at large, with particular focus on the Jewish community.”

The appetite for displaying art has continued to grow. “We try to have a diversity of artists, including emerging artists,” Awend says. “We’ve had to adapt and evolve with the times, but we always keep the doors open to new ideas and new artists.”

The Tychman Shapiro Gallery has been a multi-use facility. When the old artist lounge was converted to a gallery, it became a multi-use space with a budget to accommodate a multi-use component. “Some of the people who come into this building are coming for other reasons,” Awend says. “The gallery gives them a chance to experience artwork that they may not otherwise get a chance to experience—and to be in a room where they’re surrounded by art. For the kids who are in this building, if they’re not frequenting museums, they get their own museum right here.”

Everyone associated with the Tychman Shapiro Gallery recognizes that it offers a crucial way for both audiences and artists to connect with Jewish life. Regarding Transfer of Memory, the recent exhibit of Holocaust survivors by photographer David Shor Habor, Awend recalls, “Every time I’d walk into the gallery, I’d see all generations in there, just standing, frozen in front of an image. I knew they were experiencing in that moment something very personal.”

“It’s a room with something to offer every visitor to the JCC—Jewish or not, young or old.”

“Artists are problem solvers, historians, observers of life,” Weiss has concluded. “The artwork that artists come up with is a testament to their important investigations.”

The Tychman Shapiro Gallery has become an indispensable meeting place for our community—truly a room with a view.

Maridots Courts: A Photographic Look Inside Israel’s Ultra-Orthodox Communities by Israeli photojournalist Gil Chinen-Magen is on display through July 25 in the Tychman Shapiro Gallery at the Sabes JCC, 4330 Cedar Lake Rd. S., St. Louis Park. For information, visit: www.sabesjcc.org.

Rimon: The Minnesota Jewish Arts Council is an initiative of the Minneapolis Jewish Federation.