

Synagogue Emanu-El at 60

by Joan Halushka

Charleston's Synagogue Emanu-El celebrated its 60th anniversary on November 11, 2007, with a huge gala in the newly refurbished Zucker Social Hall. A sold-out crowd enjoyed an evening of magnificent décor, marvelous food, and exciting entertainment. The event commemorated six decades of congregational life, and also culminated several years of planning for and construction of Synagogue Emanu-El's new addition and renovation.

Emanu-El traces its history back to the summer of 1947 when a group of members from Orthodox Brith Sholom met to discuss the possibility of either converting the congregation from Orthodoxy to Conservative Judaism or breaking away to form a Conservative synagogue. The consensus of the group was to break away. The Kronsberg and Steinberg families, along with Nathan Goldberg, Milton Banov, and Hyman Rephan, formed the active nucleus within a group of 73 other charter members. Macey Kronsberg became the first president, and within a few months, land was purchased. Matthew "Mattie" Steinberg's family contributed a surplus Army chapel to be used as a sanctuary, and the congregation hired its first rabbi, Lewis Weintraub.

During this time, the ladies of the congregation blossomed. Sisterhood Emanu-El was formed, with Anita Steinberg as its



Synagogue Emanu-El's 60th Anniversary gala evening, November 11, 2007.

first president. The Sisterhood established a Sunday school and over the years has raised funds to help support the many activities and rituals in the synagogue. Alan Rubin was the first Bar Mitzvah, and Barbara Steinberg (Spitz) was the first to be confirmed. JoAnn Steinberg was the first bride to be married at Emanu-El.

In the early 1950s, Leon Steinberg purchased a site off Highway 61 for use as a cemetery. Recognizing that the synagogue was rapidly outgrowing the Army chapel,



Emanu-El's new sanctuary on Gordon Street, ca. 1955.

congregants formed a committee to raise money to buy land and erect a new building. Ed Kronsberg, Irving Steinberg, and Hyman Rephan took on the fundraising challenge. An architect was hired who designed a cathedral-like sanctuary big enough to hold 1000 members. The builders broke ground in 1954 and on December 18, 1955, the congregation moved into its new home on Gordon Street in Wagner Terrace. Rabbi Gerald Wolpe took the helm, serving as spiritual leader for four exciting years. Wolpe was succeeded by several other rabbis. In 1964, Rabbi Jordan Taxon joined Emanu-El's family and stayed in Charleston for ten years. Known as "Mister Fix-it," Rabbi Taxon was "as comfortable with a hammer in his hand as a siddur," remembers a current member. The synagogue thrived on Gordon Street.

In the '60s and '70s, the majority of younger members moved to neighborhoods west of the Ashley River. A young rabbi, Charles Sherman, was hired 1974 to replace Rabbi Taxon. Sherman was a dynamic community leader who fought against the development of Kiawah Island by Kuwaiti businessmen. As the congregation continued to grow, the younger contingent wanted Emanu-El to relocate west of the Ashley, but those still living around the synagogue opposed the move. Through quiet persuasion and a memorable Yom Kippur sermon, Rabbi Sherman convinced young and old alike that it was time for a change.

Charles Altman, Mickey Fischbein, Charlie Goldberg, and Samuel Steinberg formed a committee to study the potential relocation. While they worked on plans for the move, Harold "Buzzy" Sherman found a buyer for the Gordon Street facilities. The congregation selected a wooded site west of the Ashley River in Parkshore



Synagogue Emanu-El in West Ashley, November 2007.

and hired an Atlanta-based architect named Benjamin Hirsch. Howard Hoffman chaired the building committee. For the two years the synagogue was under construction, Shabbat and minyan services were held at the JCC, the High Holidays were celebrated at the Gaillard Auditorium, and synagogue offices were located in an apartment on Ashley Hall Road. Rabbi Alan Cohen replaced Rabbi Sherman in 1976, and on December 9, 1979, he officiated at the dedication ceremonies for the new synagogue.

Ten years later, on September 21, 1989, Hurricane Hugo swept through Charleston just before Rosh Hashanah and left considerable damage to the synagogue and its grounds in its wake. The membership banded together to restore the grounds and prepare for the upcoming High Holy Days. In spite of rainwater pouring through the destroyed roof, Emanu-El welcomed the New Year in the sanctuary. In the months to follow, the building was repaired and restored.

After almost 30 years at the present address, Synagogue Emanu-El continues to thrive and play a central role in the lives of its members through life cycle and social events. The congregation has grown to over 450 families. With the start of

the 21st century, the synagogue organized a Men's Club. Emanu-El boasts morning and afternoon minyanim, an active Sunday and Hebrew school, as well as youth groups for children of all ages. The B'nai Mitzvah calendar is crowded. Brit Milah, baby namings, and funerals all are performed by a dedicated staff, now under the leadership of Rabbi Robert Judd. Every year the Nathan and Lenore Goldberg Scholar-in-Residence Shabbat Weekend gives participants an opportunity for learning and reflection.

Looking Back . . . Looking Forward

by Theodore Levin, Emanu-El president

When my wife Rose and I joined Emanu-El in 1966, it was then as it is today, a warm and welcoming congregation. As current president of the synagogue, I can say with assurance that a lot has been accomplished in the past 60 years and more progress is being made every day. Looking back you can see all this came from an initial meeting that took place on Sullivans Island in 1947, when a group of young men and women gathered with an idea to create a place of worship where the entire family could learn and worship together. We anticipate a bright future ahead, with young leadership to take the helm and propel us forward in this 21st century. Our goal is to reach out to the entire community, young and old, and share our Jewish culture and values as I am sure our founders would have wanted us to do.