

Chronicling Jewish communities; Local man's 'Jews of Color: In Color!' at Sixth & I Historic Synagogue



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Bryan Schwartz was living in Europe in 1999 when, almost by accident, he made a discovery that has become the "driving passion" of his life.

The Bethesda resident -- whose photo exhibit *Jews of Color: In Color!* will be on display at the Sixth & I Historic Synagogue in the District Sunday through Nov. 28 -- had been visiting different countries and spending Shabbat with local Jewish communities.

Wanting to go to North Africa for Pesach, he looked up "Jews" in a guidebook. He was amazed to discover a 2,000-year-old Jewish community -- with 15 synagogues and the oldest Torah in the world -- on the island of Djerba off the coast of Tunisia.

"I remember thinking to myself, 'This is absolutely astonishing,'" he says.

"I'd been active in the Jewish community since I was young and had never heard of this. I thought there must be communities all over the world like this, part of the place they live, but distinctively Jewish.

"How interesting it would be if I could interview those people and photograph them so other Jewish communities could see how these people live, and I could tell their stories."

As a result, the civil rights attorney has visited Jewish communities in 28 countries on five continents, forming a nonprofit (*Scattered Among the Nations*) to help finance his quest.

His passion provides him an "outlet for artistic expression in writing and photography.

"But it also spreads a message about our multicultural Jewish world and helps people in those isolated and needy Jewish communities get what they need to continue practicing Judaism."

For example, Schwartz visited Ghana's House of Israel community at Chanukah, bringing candles, menorot and dreidels.

"For the kids, the dreidels were a big thing," he says. "When I would wake up in the morning, the kids would be playing with them with their dads."

The Inca Jews of Peru required more extensive aid. They were a small group of Christians who had studied the Hebrew Bible and concluded that Jewish customs better reflected God's commandments.

They were so desperate for Jewish books that one member photocopied every page of the Chumash onto parchment and stitched the pages together to make a Torah.

Some of the 300 members of this group converted and immigrated to Israel in 1990 and 1991. Scattered Among the Nations raised money in 2001 for a beit din, religious court, to visit Peru and convert another 84 of the Inca Jews.

Schwartz became a serious photographer after participating in the March of the Living program in high school that took him to concentration camps in Europe and to Israel. Since then, he has taken tens of thousands of photos of people around the world.

He sees a similar appeal for another of his passions, poetry. Photography and poetry both employ an economy of expression, he notes.

"One image or a few words captures an entire experience," Schwartz explains. "I could take a portrait of someone in a village in Africa, and his expression, the way he is dressed, the way he is sitting say so much about the person and circumstances of that part of world."

Born in 1972 into an observant Conservative family in Walnut Creek, Calif., he grew up in the San Francisco Bay area, attending Hebrew school and becoming bar mitzvah. In high school, he was vice president of the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization.

He received a bachelor's degree from Cornell University, where he was president of the student government, and a law degree from the University of California at Berkeley in 2000.

His resume includes clerking for a federal judge in Pennsylvania, working for the

Equal Opportunities Employment Commission and managing Democratic political campaigns in Texas, New Orleans and Berkeley. Schwartz has worked for the District law firm Passman & Kaplan since 2003.

The 50 photos in *Jews of Color: In Color* portray Jews in India's Bene Israel and Benei Menashe communities, Mexico's Venta Prieta community, Ghana's House of Israel and Zimbabwe's Shona Jews.

The exhibit -- co-sponsored by the Cultural Institute of Mexico, the Embassy of Ghana and the American Sephardi Federation - is based on a book by the same name that Schwartz, photographer Sandy Carter and journalist Jay Sand are collaborating on.

Schwartz has written articles on the exhibit-book project for *Hadassah* magazine, *Jerusalem Report* and *Ha'aretz*.

The exhibit, which has been shown in New York at the Center for Jewish History, will head to the San Francisco Bay area after its run at the historic synagogue.

An attorney, photographer, writer and head of nonprofit, Schwartz would seem to be overwhelmingly busy, but he says that's not so -- "You have time for what you make time for."

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