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Allison and Kenneth Gruder at Chabad of Westport's 2011 annual gala.

Spotlight on. . .

Ken Gruder – helping Chabad grow

By Cindy Mindell

In October, Chabad of Fairfield completed its purchase of the former Elks Lodge on Brookside Drive in Fairfield. The acquisition is just the latest real estate transaction facilitated on behalf of the Chabad movement in Fairfield County by Goldman, Gruder & Woods, LLC, a law firm based in Norwalk, Greenwich, and Trumbull.

The firm has provided pro bono legal representation over the last two years, as various local branches of Chabad have sought larger quarters to accommodate growing community programming – including Chabad of Westport's January 2013 purchase of the historic Three Bears Restaurant on Newtown Turnpike. In addition, Goldman, Gruder & Woods has sponsored events at the New Canaan

Jewish Center/Chabad New Canaan Darien, and helped Chabad of Ridgefield find a permanent location.

Attorney Kenneth Gruder is a founding member of the practice and serves as chair of its real estate law practice group.

Residents of Fairfield, Gruder and his wife, Allison, are life members of Congregation Rodeph Sholom in Bridgeport, where they were married and where their three children celebrated their b'nai mitzvah.

The Gruders first became involved at Chabad of Westport several years ago. When Rabbi Shlame and Miriam Landa arrived in Fairfield to set up a Chabad house, Gruder says, "It was a natural thing for me to assist in, because I live in town and I'm really happy to help any of the Chabads grow, find a home, increase supporters, whatever the case may be."

The Gruder children reflect their parents' extensive Jewish communal involvement, attending both Chabad youth programming and Merkaz Community High School for Judaic Studies in Bridgeport. The Gruders were presented with a community service award at Chabad of Westport's 2011 annual gala.

"Ken is the ultimate communal servant and gives generously of his time and resources," says Rabbi Landa. "He doesn't wait for help to be requested but rather goes out of his way to find opportunities to be of service. He called me 18 months ago and informed that he had found the perfect location for a new Chabad center in Fairfield. In the ensuing months, he has helped on multiple fronts such as negotiating the purchase on Chabad of Fairfield's behalf, hosting a major fundraising event in his home, and pulling together and directing our team of leading local professionals to guide us through the zoning process. This project would not have happened without his positive energy and determination to see things through."

Gruder attributes Chabad's growth to the recent demographic fluctuations widely debated in the American Jewish community and documented in the 2013 Pew Research Center survey, "A Portrait of Jewish Americans."

"I see generational shifts and a changing and challenging landscape for many synagogues," he says. "It seems that times are changing and [the Chabad] model seems to appeal to a lot of people who maybe would not belong to a synagogue."

Chabad offers an entry point to Judaism and Jewish community that appeals to a wide range of Jews, says Gruder, explaining the motivating factor behind his involvement in the organization.

“You have a lot of [Jews] out there who, but for Chabad, would not belong at all, would not participate at all,” he says. “These are people not necessarily being taken away from a synagogue or being torn between two places, but maybe wouldn’t be doing anything – whether it’s through apathy, intermarriage, lack of motivation, inertia, whatever the case may be. So you have to come to the realization that it’s either something or nothing – and what’s better?”