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Art ahoy!: Brisbane artist breaks out the paint at floating Jewish conference

by joe eskenazi, staff writer

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Beth Grossman has yet to meet a person who couldn't take a paintbrush and transform a blank canvas.

"I tell them how I can't stand the look of a plain white piece of paper. I ask them to make a mark on the paper, cover it with color," said the Brisbane artist and art instructor.

"Change it in some way so it's not a perfect piece of white paper looking back at you."

Grossman had her share of coaxing to do on her latest artistic endeavor, a cruise down the Volga River for Jewish women from both America and the former Soviet Union, put on by the charitable organization Project Keshet. The Illinois-based nonprofit aims to foster relationships between Jewish women from the former Soviet Union and elsewhere.

After full days of workshops on everything from business management to remedial Judaism, participants trudged into Grossman's workshop for some catharsis on the canvas.

Everyone painted, Grossman noted, but American women apparently complained more.

"The former Soviet Union women were generally very excited about the possibility; they got there and said, 'All right, let's work,'" recalled Grossman. "American women tended to kvetch, 'I can't draw a straight line.' I said, 'Great. You don't have to.'"

Instead, Grossman wanted the women to create works of art that symbolized their family histories and their Judaism, straight lines or no.

"One of the ones that moved me the most was when one woman made a beautiful sunrise picture, and, on the back, wrote 'First tefillin service ever,'" she said.

"To her, it was more beautiful than the rising sun."

In one memorable session, a late-night burst of energy kept Grossman's students up painting until 1:30 in the morning. The work produced on the boat will be kept in a decorated box Grossman will create and, she hopes, exhibited throughout the nation.

"It was a very tight room surrounded by glass and the scenery of the Volga kept moving by as we were working," she recalled.

"We were kind of kibitzing as people kept their hands moving and sharing stories. [The room was] really full of spirit and energy."

In between art sessions, the boat landed at several stops along the Volga to check up on past Project Keshet enterprises. Among them were a garden nursery and computer learning center started by several Jewish women via a Keshet "micro-loan," and meetings with some of the 165 women's groups established in the last decade.

"What those women can do with a couple of thousand dollars under the extreme situation they live in, which

is constantly evolving and changing, is really humbling," said Grossman.

She views the works created by the 90 or more participants as "histories," a way to record the impact Jewish women have had on post-Soviet society.

"I wanted to give each woman a sense that her story was crucial to making up the history we were creating. And we do create [history] as Jewish women in the world. I got a really clear picture of the role women in the former Soviet Union are playing in creating a civil society there," she said.

"And if they don't write their own stories, their own history, no one else is going to."

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