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Free Synagogue Members Start \$500K Restoration

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The Free Synagogue of Flushing recently being named to the New York State and National Register of Historic Places couldn't come at a better time. The synagogue has launched an ambitious campaign to raise \$500,000 over the next several years to restore and renovate the sanctuary. The funding is essential to restore the temple's stained glass windows, which have fallen into disrepair, and to make additional structural repairs to the outside dome and roof. Leaks have begun to damage the interior ceilings and elegant artwork.

A contractor has already started to remove the windows. The windows are being stored in Philadelphia, where an expert in stained glass restoration will embark on the painstaking task.

The synagogue, a 1927 Neoclassical Revival structure established as part of the "Free Synagogue" movement, was added to the State Register of Historic Places this past summer and to the National Register just last month. The listings make the temple eligible for various public preservation programs and services, including a number of grants.

Synagogue officials plan to apply to several organizations for funding, but board members fear amounts raised may not be enough. The estimated restoration cost of half a million dollars is a conservative estimate. Once the work is under way, contractors may uncover more areas in need of repair. The synagogue hopes to raise most of the money on its own, and officials say it could take up to three years.

"This work is critical if we are to preserve the cultural legacy of Free Synagogue," Allan Goldberg, first vice president of Free Synagogue and a member for the past 22 years, said. "From an architectural standpoint, our synagogue is a national treasure, and it would be tragic to lose the magnificent stained glass windows."

Requests for pledges have been sent to the congregation. Synagogue

officials are also planning fundraising events and are hoping the general community will support their efforts.

“The rabbi, the cantor and the lay leadership of our synagogue agree that as a liberal Jewish congregation, actively involved in welcoming and interacting with the multi-ethnic population of Flushing, we are an asset to the community,” Florence Boyar, Free Synagogue president and a member for more than 30 years, said. “We provide diversity and offer a range of programs and activities for the entire community, mostly without charge. For many, we are their first or only contact with ‘things Jewish’ and can help create and encourage acceptance and good will in this diverse area.” Free Synagogue of Flushing stands in one of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in the country. Surrounded by Asian restaurants, groceries and shops, as well as a variety of other religious institutions, the synagogue was established through the efforts of the Hebrew Woman’s Aid Society of Flushing.

It is an architectural marvel. The neo-classical building, designed by Maurice Courland, features a massive portico supported by four ionic pillars topped by a pediment inscribed with the words of Isaiah, “For mine house shall be called a house of prayer for all people.”

In the magnificent sanctuary, dark green pilasters are graced with intricate gold-leaf filigree. Stained glass windows, crafted in Czechoslovakia, surround the sanctuary in rich radiant colors. A stained-glass dome designed around a Star of David is centered in the domed ceiling that covers the entire sanctuary.

Throughout the year, the synagogue offers events that are open to the entire community, usually free of charge. Interfaith dialogue breakfasts featuring Muslim, Hindu and Sikh speakers; an interfaith choral festival; the temple’s renowned “Judas Maccabaeus” Chanukah concert, and classes in Judaism aim to foster understanding among different religious groups.

Free Synagogue’s rabbi, Michael Weisser, is a nationally known expert on interfaith relations. Over the years, he has been an active voice on multicultural issues and social concerns, participating in international conferences. His ability to convert Larry Trapp, the former grand dragon of the KKK in Lincoln, Nebraska, inspired a book. Not by the Sword tells the amazing story of their relationship and Trapp’s transformation in response to Weisser’s kindness.

Steven Pearlston, Free Synagogue’s cantor since 1973, is impressive in his own right. He spent eight summers affiliated with Opera Fort Collins as, variously, principal tenor, chorus master or conductor. His other operatic venues include

The Aspen Music Festival, Central City Opera, The Washington Civic Opera and the Khan Theater in Jerusalem. He has been a solo performer at Alice Tully Hall in the works of J.S. Bach, and with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, where he also served for 10 seasons as chorister. He has appeared as vocalist with the American Ballet Theater, the Alvin Ailey Dance Company and the Joffrey Ballet.