

TEEN MEETS NEEDS OF NEW MOTHERS

Nonprofit provides diaper bags

BY MICHELLE TRAURING

On a lazy July afternoon, it was a lunchtime chat-turned-debate that suddenly changed the course of Ariel Kirman's young life.

Over cold cuts and lemonade at her family's home in Westhampton Beach, the 17-year-old had asked her father for his opinion on an upcoming slideshow presentation that she was creating for Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services (IRIS), where she volunteers with the Family Literacy program that helps educate its clients on aspects of American life.

She had two choices: cyberbullying or diaper bag essentials. While she was convinced the latter would be more helpful, her father insisted on the former — erupting in a fierce dispute.

"He, himself, along with my mom, were both born in the USSR, so they both are refugees," Ariel recalled last week during a telephone interview, about six months later. "And they were talking about how when they arrived in the United States, there's no way they could have afforded a diaper bag because many refugees just don't have the money for that. And so, I realized that, actually, he was totally right."

That didn't stop her from,

ultimately, giving the presentation on how to properly pack a diaper bag — but it did get her thinking.

In a matter of months, Ariel had acquired her 501(c)(3) status for a new nonprofit called DENA, which stands for Diaper Essentials for New Americans, committed to helping immigrants and refugees with young children get the supplies they need — from diaper bags and diapers, baby wipes, and changing pads to Ziploc bags, anti-rash products, and baby toys.

To date, DENA has donated hundreds of items, worth

thousands of dollars total, to five partner organizations in the Tri-State area, including IRIS, which was the first come on board, and most recently welcomed International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) into the

fold. Adding HIAS to her roster felt personal, Ariel said, like coming full circle. It is the very same organization that helped her parents when they fled from Russia to the United States in the late 1970s seeking religious asylum.

"DENA is one of the largest parts of my life, but it's part of a deeper passion that I have for immigration, in general," Ariel said. "I'm just very interested in it because



High school junior Ariel Kirman started a nonprofit, Diaper Essentials for New Americans, to help refugee and immigrant new mothers.

of my family history and because, as Jews, we've been expelled from many places over the course of history. It's fascinating to me how we welcome strangers, how strangers welcome us. It's a really interesting story for me."

In Russia, Ariel's family faced religious persecution and discrimination, barring them from attending college and working decent jobs, so they emigrated in order to give their children their best chance, she said.

"Sometimes I tend to think of it as hopping on a plane and showing up at JFK, but that's really not the way that it was," she said. "It was such a grueling experience for them, really. They left the USSR, they spent a year in Italy and then they eventually made it to the United States, where it was a total culture shock for them."

Overwhelmed by living in poverty, trying to fit into the English-speaking school system and assimilating to a

new life, Ariel's parents defied the odds, with food and clothing donations from HIAS to help them along the way.

"My dad got into a specialized high school and then he went on to college, and so did my mom, so that's been a really big source of inspiration for me," Ariel said, "learning about how they were able to survive with the help of groups like HIAS. So that's been a driving force behind my work and my life in general."

Her family's journey is what motivated Ariel to volunteer for IRIS in the first place, and then branch out on her own with DENA, with day-to-day operations entirely student-run by her friends from various summer programs, explained the high school junior who attends Trinity School in Manhattan, but has ridden out the COVID-19 pandemic on the East End.

"I would love to ramp up the sheer numbers of supplies we can send. Bigger

picture, I'd love to start expanding to different schools and getting more kids involved," Ariel said. "I think if we could partner with actual manufacturers of diaper bags that would be willing to donate some of their diaper bags, I would love if that would be on the horizon for us."

At least for now, DENA is reliant on fundraising. A \$50 donation buys a fully stuffed diaper bag, plus shipping, Ariel said, which can be made on DENA's website, dena.charity, and, in the future, a GoFundMe campaign is in the works. All proceeds are put toward buying diaper bag supplies, which are sent directly to partner organizations or the families themselves.

So far, the nonprofit has helped dozens of immigrants, including a refugee named Oleksandra, who wrote in a testimonial, "Thank you so much, I got the wipes and bag! Thank you so very much it was a

very nice surprise!" as well as Martina, who said, "Thank you so much, it's beautiful. Really, I won't be able to thank you enough for this assistance."

Looking ahead, Ariel said she hopes to launch a fundraising walk for diaper bags and, later, diaper bag drives once the pandemic restrictions lift — anything she can do to help DENA grow, she said.

"It's just totally changed my life and the way that I see not only the world, but the people around me and the people closest to me," she said. "I think what's so fulfilling about this work is knowing that I'm completing the circle and helping people in the same way that my ancestors were helped — not only my direct family members but, also, in a more ancient way, being part of that cycle of humanity that helps other people. I'm giving help to people that will, one day, help others — or maybe their children will help others."

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