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THE PEOPLE AND PLACES OF NORTHWEST WASHINGTON

JULY 8, 2009 ■ PAGE 13

Yoo-hoo, Mrs. Kempner!

Local filmmaker focuses camera on Jewish TV star

By **OLGA KHAZAN**
Current Correspondent

During the early 1950s, quintessential Jewish mother Gertrude Berg played one of the most beloved characters on TV. But even though her character captivated America, making Berg at one point the highest-paid woman in the country, this early media mogul is largely unknown among audiences today.

This summer, D.C.-based filmmaker Aviva Kempner hopes to revive Berg's legacy through the film "Yoo-Hoo, Mrs. Goldberg," about "the most famous woman in America you've never heard of."

The documentary, which will open next week, chronicles Berg's revolutionary TV and radio work, as well as her positive effect on the lives of Jews during a time of rampant anti-Semitism. At the film's premiere last month at the Washington DC Jewish Community Center, Kempner said Berg's character Molly Goldberg was "one of the most positive portrayals of Jewish women" in mass media — then and now.

In 1929, Berg began writing a radio show, "The Rise of the Goldbergs," about a New York Jewish family, casting herself in the role of Molly, the wisecracking matriarch. In 1949, the show jumped to TV on CBS as "The Goldbergs," in which Molly doled

out advice and managed a meshugeneh household with old-world Yiddish flair.

"My MO is doing films about Jewish heroes," Kempner said. "Generations of Jewish Americans don't even know that there was an Oprah of her day that created the sitcom and never gets credit for it."

Kempner's film includes interviews with Berg's grandchildren, prominent Jewish producers, actor Ed Asner and National Public Radio correspondent Susan Stamberg. It also features Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, whom Kempner met at a French Embassy function.

"She glowed when I said I was making a movie about Gertrude Berg," Kempner said.

In the film, Ginsburg fondly recalls listening to the radio show in her childhood and said she could relate to Molly's character.

"We all listened to Molly Goldberg on the radio as a family," Ginsburg said. "She was an amalgam of Jewish aunts and grandmothers."

Raised in New York City and in the Catskills by immigrant parents, Berg drew inspiration for the characters on her shows from her daily life.

Her radio show debuted just weeks after the stock market crash of 1929. For the next 17 years, Berg would rise at 6 a.m. each day,



scribbling ideas in a notebook while walking the streets of New York and writing the scripts that would delight a massive audience.

At its height, "The Rise of the Goldbergs" was second in popularity only to "Amos and Andy." In 1950, Berg won the first Best Actress Emmy for her work on the TV version of the show.

"She was Tina Fey before there was Tina Fey," Kempner said. "The most popular TV shows — 'Friends,' 'Seinfeld,' 'The Honeymooners' — involve families living in apartment buildings, with neighbors walking in and out. She's the one who created it."

The Goldbergs' homey humor could not have come at a better time. With markets plunging and unemployment soaring, the radio show provided a much-needed distraction.

"They were this positive, warm Jewish family saying everything would be all right," Kempner said. "They say President Roosevelt once said, 'I didn't get us out of the Depression, the Goldbergs did.'"



Above left, Current File Photo; above, courtesy of Aviva Kempner
"Yoo-Hoo, Mrs. Goldberg," the latest film by Chevy Chase documentarian Aviva Kempner, above left, aims to revive the legacy of once-famous TV and radio performer Gertrude Berg, above. Berg created the radio show "The Rise of the Goldbergs," which later moved to TV, establishing the format of many later sitcoms.

Aside from laying the groundwork for future sitcoms, Berg's shows also familiarized non-Jewish American audiences with Jewish American culture. According to Kempner, the show

allowed many non-Jews to watch a Passover Seder for the first time and to see that Jewish home life was not all that foreign.

"It may be that Molly Goldberg See **Goldberg**/Page 16

HOME & GARDEN

Arboretum unveils the inner bonsai

By **TERESA G. GIONIS**
Current Correspondent

Arin Packard wants to take on the many myths that surround his art. The top misconceptions? Creating bonsai is too challenging. It requires years of specialized training. It's time-consuming. It's for retirees. It's solitary.

"I want to show people how enjoyable it is — that you don't need a Ph.D. in botany or years of experience to create a bonsai," he said. "Anyone can do it. I really want to encourage people to try it themselves."

Packard is the assistant curator at the National Bonsai & Penjing Museum, a Washington treasure tucked inside the National Arboretum, off New York Avenue NE. His new exhibit, "Becoming a Bonsai,"

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Courtesy of the National Arboretum

A plant, top, becomes a bonsai, bottom.

Take2 offers autistic campers a Plan B

By **LINDA LOMBARDI**
Current Correspondent

To help explain how Take2 summer camp benefits its target population,

Dr. Lauren Kenworthy, a consultant to the program, uses a metaphor to describe how the campers see the world.

"They're standing an inch from a mosaic. They're very acute about how the tile they're looking at is a different shade of teal from the one next to it. But they don't know they're looking at a picture of a boat."

The four-week camp, now in its sixth year in Northwest D.C., is designed for children

with social learning disorders such as Asperger's syndrome and high-functioning autism.

Schoolwork generally isn't a problem for these highly intelligent and verbal children, who are mostly in mainstream classes during the school year, but other skills that come naturally to most are a severe challenge. The result can be social isolation.

Camp co-founder Monica Adler Werner says you can see these children's difficulties "as a form of social dyslexia. They're literally not seeing

nonverbal clues: body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, context."

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Bill Petros/The Current

The Northwest summer camp teaches social skills that can be difficult for those with social learning disorders.

CAMP

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To address those challenges, the camp offers activities that work on breaking down social interactions into their component parts to make them understandable.

But according to Kenworthy, director of the Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders at Children's National Medical Center, what's special — possibly unique — about the camp is the way it also addresses another aspect of the problem: deficits in what experts call "executive function," which includes the ability to see the big picture and respond flexibly to circumstances.

For the most basic everyday activities, it's crucial to know what the goal is — and to be able to come up with a Plan B if the first path to the goal is blocked.

"This happens to us every day — you go to the store and they're out of spaghetti so you buy linguine," says Werner.

And these skills tie directly into the social interaction problem, Werner observes, because flexibility is key to reacting appropriately to other people. "It's different every single time — you have to be able to read them and know what's happening, and how to respond," she said.

Because this type of thinking doesn't come naturally to children with Asperger's and autism, they need to be explicitly taught the kind of strategies that most use automatically. So camp activities

break down everyday situations into goals and plans and include discussions about how to come up with Plan B. Then, they allow the 17 campers to practice these strate-

gies in a safe environment — a place where they can always try again and see the results of a different approach, inspiring the name "Take2."



Bill Petros/The Current

Take2 campers map solutions for situations in which a first plan doesn't work.

gies in a safe environment — a place where they can always try again and see the results of a different approach, inspiring the name "Take2."

Of course, because they're kids (8 to 10 years old) and it's summer, teachers make sure the activities are fun.

One favorite is watching and discussing an old cartoon where the Pink Panther is trying to cross a street and needs to come up with a Plan B over and over again. A take-home activity involves making a plan to go to a toy store to buy a gift for a

friend, and thinking about how to deal with the common issues in that situation — like the frustration of wanting to buy something for yourself instead.

Werner says kids and parents are encouraged to make a game of following the plan, and even make a game out of what to do if the written-down Plan A doesn't work: "Rip it up; feed it to the dog."

The camp makes sure that the benefits reach beyond the summer by passing on information to campers' teachers about what strategies worked well for each individual. But the program leaders' goals have always gone beyond their own campers.

Co-founder Lisa Greenman, a Chevy Chase resident, started Take2 because of her own son — "I had a child that had no place to go and had very serious needs" — but from the beginning, her vision was to create something that would serve a larger population. She says the original vision was to be a pilot program

for a year-round curriculum — and in fact it inspired a program, directed by Werner, at the Ivymount School in Rockville.

In addition, an average of half the campers are on scholarship, and organizers have even attended to details like making sure that their various locations (this year, the Edmund Burke School near Van Ness) have always been Metro-accessible. A new online fundraising effort this year through the organization Global Giving has raised more than \$14,000 — much of it from new donors — which will help them further expand their programs.

And Kenworthy says Take2 is unusually open to allowing researchers to examine whether its techniques are effective and could potentially be of wider use.

These broader goals are important, because, as Greenman observes, her team has no illusions that anyone is going to be "fixed" and sent out to the world with no

further problems in four weeks." But even in those four weeks, important progress can be made — as many who've gone to a summer camp can attest.

Think of teaching children to swim, says Werner. "You don't throw them in the deep end. You sit with them on the side of the pool and talk about what they're going to do first. They get the opportunity to practice the skills in a scaffolded way," she explains. "And the deep end for these children is their everyday environment — there's no escape from social interaction."

For more information or to donate to Take2 camp, visit take2camp.org or globalgiving.com/projects/teaching-children-with-autism.

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