

# DAILY NEWS

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## BIG TOWN BIG HEART

CELEBRATING NEW YORKERS WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

BY HEATHER ROBINSON

**B**efore Stanlee Stahl was born, during World War II, her mother organized rallies in Union Square to save the Jews of Europe.

"I grew up hearing my mother say that if you raised enough money, you could get Jews out of Germany," Stahl says.

Today, Stahl is executive vice president of The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, a Manhattan-based nonprofit dedicated to supporting righteous gentiles, or non-Jews who saved Jews in Europe during the Holocaust.

"Unfortunately, during that time, there was very little concern for the Jews of Europe," says Stahl, 61, a petite woman who approaches the subject of the righteous gentiles — or rescuers as she calls them — with an almost-obsessive energy that belies her warm, musical voice.

"In Europe, there were perpetrators, collaborators, and the overwhelming majority, [who] were by-standers. The rescuers were the precious few.

"They were men and women who had the courage to care and the courage to act... and they did something extraordinary."

The foundation's mission is to distribute funds to the rescuers — a vital task, because most of those who saved Jews during the war and who are living in former Eastern bloc countries such as Poland are poor today.

Named for her uncle, Stanley Goldblum, an American soldier who died during World War II in the Battle of Rome, Stahl sees her work as linking the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds, the United States and the international community.

"I was always taught, you are a part of your community, but you are also an American," she says. "The Jewish Foundation for the



photo by David Handschuh

Stanlee Stahl

Righteous builds bridges in many ways and on many levels."

Her career has focused on combating indifference to human need. After obtaining a master's degree in public administration from George Washington University, she worked as a grants and contracts specialist for the National Institutes of Health. After four years, she did a stint overseas as an administrator for Magen David Adom, Israel's Red Cross society, and eventually went to work for a regional office of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, where her job included evaluating damage at Three Mile Island.

Stahl answered a blind ad in 1992, and was subsequently hired at The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, where she has expanded the organization's mission to include

Holocaust education as well as direct aid to the rescuers.

"We work to educate teachers about the Holocaust because that's what we believe will make the most difference in terms of preventing such horrors from occurring in the future," she explains. "It is also a way in which we honor the rescuers."

Just fewer than 22,000 individuals have received the official designation of Righteous Gentile from Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust Museum. That designation and financial need are the two main criteria for receiving funds from the foundation.

One of the programs Stahl has initiated is for youngsters celebrating their bar or bat mitzvahs, a rite of passage for Jewish children at 13 for boys, 12 or 13 for girls. Through the program, the kids sponsor or otherwise honor a rescuer.

"With the bar/bat mitzvah program, we take a rite of passage, and help the youngster find a role model," says Stahl.

### RESCUERS' RESCUER

Stanlee Stahl helps sustain those who saved Jews from the Nazis

One of the recent bar/bat mitzvah sponsorships is between Kazimiera Przybyowicz, 75, of Poland — who was only 11 when she risked her life to save others — and Noah and Jenna Chodos, a brother and sister from Wilmington, Del.

The idea to sponsor a righteous gentile appealed to the family because the children's grandmother, Eva Chodos, was a Holocaust survivor.

"Our grandmother passed away about six months ago," explains Jenna, 12, who will celebrate with her brother, Noah, 13, this month. "She was a [Holocaust] survivor, and someone like Kazimiera might have helped her.

"The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous gave us information about people we could help, and we decided on Kazimiera. She risked her own life gathering food for the people her parents were hiding."

They have created a web site, [www.noahandjenna.com](http://www.noahandjenna.com), which tells Kazimiera's story, to raise money for her stipend of about \$ 1,500 a year — a small sum in the United States, but one that goes further in Poland.

Stahl's other innovations include instituting a reunion each year between a Holocaust survivor and his or her rescuer.

One of the education programs she started is The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous Holocaust Centers of Excellence Program, which brings selected teachers from various regions of the country, and from overseas, to Columbia University each June for a week-long, intensive course of study with eminent Holocaust scholars.

Stahl is no stranger to combining humanitarianism and innovation: In the mid-'80s, she founded the social action program at her synagogue, Oheb Shalom, in South Orange, N.J., where she lives with her husband, George Ackerman, 61, a management consultant, and their son, David, 22. The program requires synagogue members to take an "ethical pledge" to do volunteer work.

To fulfill her pledge, Stahl participates in the Interfaith Hospitality Network, in which she volunteers to serve food and sleep overnight with homeless people staying at various churches and synagogues.

"Because I cannot look at a photo of the Warsaw ghetto, of Jewish children on the street, and not do something about homelessness in our society," Stahl says.

"People ask me, 'What do you say to the homeless?' I tell them, 'They're people just like us, who've been burned out of their apartments, have lost their jobs. There but for the grace of God go I.'"

She observes the Sabbath with her husband and son, and says that on several Friday nights they have discussed the rescuers, and what they themselves would do if confronted with such an awesome moral choice.

"Some people say, '[I would] if I were single, if I weren't risking the lives of my children,'" Stahl says, "but you know, single people want to live, too. The truth is, you cannot know what you would do. I only pray that we in America are never tested."