

Synagogue pews find new life in high school wood shop project



JANUARY 26, 2015 5:30 AM • BY DOUG MOORE

Last year, as Congregation Temple Israel was renovating its sanctuary, one of the bigger challenges was what to do with the old pews — the largest ones 28 feet long.

At the same time, Karen Kalish, a St. Louis philanthropist who focuses on improving public education, stumbled upon an article online stating that students who live in homes with bookcases do better academically. She previously founded a teacher home visit

program now in 27 schools.

“We know from teacher home visits that many of our families don’t have bookcases, and some don’t have tables for kids to do their homework on,” Kalish said.

Over the coming weeks, Kalish’s desire to create at-home study spaces for students would converge with the synagogue’s need to unload a set of pews.

It started when Kalish first took her idea to Kelvin Adams, superintendent of St. Louis Public Schools.

“Do you have any wood shop classes?” Kalish asked. Adams told her there was one at Roosevelt High School. He loved the idea of students building desks and bookshelves — but he told Kalish she would have to find the wood.

Kalish sent out about 100 emails and called lumber yards seeking donations. Her efforts got noticed by the St. Louis Jewish Light newspaper, which ran an item. Rabbi Amy Feder at Temple Israel called Kalish.

“We have pews that we would love to donate,” Feder said.

On May 2, 79 pews were delivered to the school.

The students in teacher Bart Adastra’s construction trades class met the moving truck outside the south St. Louis school, and hauled the pews inside, to an unused classroom. With the summer break quickly approaching, turning the pews into desks and bookshelves would be saved as a project for the new school year.

Last week, Adastra kept close watch on the students as they sawed, hammered and drilled,

transforming the last of the pine pews with dark veneer into what should be about 35 desks and about the same number of bookshelves.

Temple Israel stressed that it wanted the design of the desks and bookshelves to use as much of the old pews as possible. Adastra enlisted the help of JEMA, a planning, architecture and design firm in Midtown. The back of the pews became desktops. The ends of the pews were turned upside down and used as legs. The slots that held the prayer books became bookshelves under the desktops.

While it would have been easier to supplement the design with new wood, the students were up for the challenge of coming up with creations using only the pews, said Jonathan McKee, an apprentice architect with JEMA.

“It got them more interested, and they came up with some cool designs,” McKee said. It came down to what would be functional, sturdy and the appropriate size, he said.

Adastra said the pew project took wood shop class beyond building a wall, drywalling it, then tearing it down.

“They got to see what can happen when something is donated, repurposed and given away to help others,” Adastra said. “They were much more vested in this project.”

Junior Heather Douglas pushed back strands of her pink hair from the goggles covering much of her face as she and classmate Shawn Kimbrell worked on a bookshelf Wednesday morning.

“It makes you want do it more when you’re helping somebody else,” said Heather, 16.

During a visit to the school in October, the students were still formalizing a design. As they studied the prototypes, weighing the pros and cons, senior Marc Tighe, 18, said the students were fortunate to be a part of a unique wood shop class.

“This is an opportunity a lot of people don’t have,” he said. “We get a taste of business and mass production.”

Robbie Wheeler, 17, a senior, said he wished he would have had one of the desks when he was younger. Back then he was relegated to lying on a hardwood floor to do his homework.

Assistant Principal Gerold Nave Jr. stopped in last week to watch the students at work.

“They’ve been put in such a good position — to give back,” Nave said.

Deliveries of the bookshelves and desks are



Roosevelt High School students (from front) Tyjuan Willis, Davion Green and Keith Brockington have a little fun as they roll donated pews along the hallway to storage on Friday, May 2, 2014, at the St. Louis school. Temple Israel was replacing their pews and donated them to the school to be made into desks and bookshelves for students in need. The idea originated from Karen Kalish with Home Works, a teacher home visit program, who saw a need for students to have a place to do their work at home. Students will begin the construction of the desks

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currently being arranged with parents in the eight St. Louis Public Schools participating in the teacher home visit program. Applications will ask parents to select whether they prefer a desk or three-shelf bookcase.

and bookshelf in the fall. Photo by Huy Mach, hmach@post-dispatch.com

Kalish said the collaboration of a synagogue and an urban high school was not on her radar when she came across the article online a year ago. But it has turned into a wonderful partnership, she said.

“I hope the families will realize the importance of having a place to keep books as cherished items,” she said. “Every home should have a place for children to do homework.”

Feder said the synagogue was happy the pews had found a new calling.

“They were being used in a most holy space, and for them to be used again for a holy purpose like education feels right,” she said.

Ultimately, Feder said, it’s bashert — a Yiddish word for “meant to be.”