Hal Bruff honored for devotion to black and Jewish communities
Praised by family and young alumni of Newark’s Weequahic High School

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Hal Bruff credited his father with teaching him a valuable civics lesson: In 1946 during a minor-league baseball game at Roosevelt Stadium in Jersey City, the hometown Giants played the Montreal Royals in a game that marked the professional debut of Jackie Robinson, who would break the color line a year later in the major leagues. “My father wanted me to see what an amazing moment in American history that was, with blacks and whites together in a stadium,” Bruff told an audience gathered for the Jewish Historical Society of New Jersey’s Lasting Impressions Gala on May 10.

It was a lesson that’s stayed with him all his life, and something he related to inherently having grown up Jewish in that era. Jews, like blacks, were judged by something “they had no control over at all.” The similarities showed that both groups “were victims of the same prejudice, humiliation, and torture, and death.”

Ever since his birth at Newark Beth Israel Hospital in 1934, Hal Bruff has maintained deep connections with his native city, its once-vibrant Jewish community, his alma mater — Weequahic High School — and the African-American student body that replaced the predominantly Jewish one of his youth.

For his enduring commitment to Newark, Bruff — now a resident of North Caldwell — was honored with the Jewish Historical Society’s 2017 Lasting Impressions Award at a dinner and ceremony at Crystal Plaza in Livingston.

Over the decades, his ties to Newark’s black community — most notably with Weequahic High School students — have been equally strong to his Jewish communal ones. He was vice president of the Jewish Community Council of Springfield; served three terms as the president of Springfield’s Reform synagogue, Temple Sha’arey Shalom, during the 1970s and was chair of the Springfield UJA.

At the May dinner, attended by 140 people, Bruff’s two daughters, Jennifer Elman and Jessica Kirson, stood on the podium together praised their father, and then introduced Hal’s son, Zach Bruff, star of the long-running sitcom “Scrubs” and director of several movies, including the critically renowned “Garden State.”

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“He cares so very deeply about his community,” his son said. “It has always boggled my father’s mind that the Jewish community that fled Newark for the suburbs so many years ago has allowed Weequahic High School to deteriorate into an environment where even those kids who have the grades and the determination to go to college have no access to the means.”

To halt the decline, Braff teamed up with a high school friend and fellow attorney, Sheldon Bross, to found the Weequahic High School Alumni Association in 1997. The association has enabled hundreds of young black and Latino Weequahic grads to attend college with the aid of scholarships.

Demonstrating the comic flair that was a major factor in his rise to fame, Zach said his father — at age 83 — “looks like a 55-year-old Hugh Hefner,” and “while most sensible 83-year-old Jews like a 55-year-old Hugh Hefner,” and people can “take comfort that there are people like Hal Braff making a difference in their communities.”

At left, Jewish Historical Society honoree Hal Braff said both blacks and Jews “were victims of the same prejudice, humiliation, and torture, and death.” On the right, Hal Braff’s son, actor-director Zach Braff, said people can “take comfort that there are people like Hal Braff making a difference in their communities.”

Spicer on the television,” the elder Braff has dedicated his time to the Weequahic High School Alumni Association and its scholarship program.

Taking a more serious tone, his son said people can “take comfort that there are people like Hal Braff making a difference in their communities…people whose sole gratification is hearing that one more kid who dreams of getting out of their unfortunate situation might just have that chance.”

Following a 20-minute video biography, the honoree came on stage to address the audience. Braff noted that when he grew up there were 70,000 Jews and some 50 synagogues in Newark. “It wasn’t really that we had so much in common religiously or politically, but what we did have was the sense of safety,” even with pro-Nazi, German-American Bund chapters in the nearby cities of Irvington and Union, and until the civil unrest of the 1960s, “we were safe there.”

He credited his late father, Joseph, for helping him feel comfortable both in and out of the Jewish community and for refusing to use derogatory language in reference to their neighbors. “He never ever participated in some of the ugly business — that ‘schvartze’ business — that we know Jews have done to humiliate themselves. Never.”

In addition to praising his father, Braff saluted his rabbi, Israel “Sy” Dresner, “who had the courage to travel to Florida as a Freedom Rider with ministers who were black and white” in 1964. They were jailed in Tallahassee, an experience that taught Braff that being a Jew means more than just religious observance.

“Going to services was not sufficient,” Braff said. “There is a lot more to it. Make the world a better place. That is your responsibility.”

Another strong influence, he said, was the late Robert Curvin, co-founder of the Newark chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality. Together, they worked to desegregate the public golf course in East Orange and integrate the once lily-white construction unions in New Jersey.

Braff said that racism in the United States is a “cancer.”

“Just as I would have been prejudiced against as a Jew in Germany, [African-Americans] — good people — have been prejudiced against in my country.”

He pointed out that since the late 1960s, most students at Weequahic High School “grow up with no contact with the white kids who are the same age, and are the same people.” Beyond its scholarship fund, Braff said the association “brings a Jewish presence into the school” and has given “hundreds and hundreds of kids the opportunity to become what we have become.”

Two of those alumni joined in saluting Braff onstage. One was Cory Rogers, a Weequahic graduate who received a bachelor’s degree in psychology at Seton Hall University in Greensburg, Pa., and a master’s in public administration at Seton Hall University in South Orange. He is now working as a mental health advocate at Catholic Charities in Newark.

Rogers joked that after being part of the evening’s predominantly Jewish audience he would “give up pork and Santa Claus to convert” to Judaism. He called Braff a “marvelous and remarkable person” who “propelled the disenfranchised and disillusioned urban high school youth to achieve lofty scholastic feats.”

Wheequehic High School graduate Cory Rogers, left, said Hal Braff helped Weequahic’s disenfranchised and disillusioned youth to achieve lofty scholastic feats.

The other alumnus was Rayvon Lisbon, whom Braff encouraged to complete his undergraduate studies at Rutgers University in Newark. Lisbon graduated with honors and plans to attend law school.

In his remarks, Lisbon recalled a conversation in which Braff assured him that even though he would be around people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds in college, “they are not better than you. You can compete on any level.”

These words “brought me out of darkness,” said Lisbon. “I climbed out of the abyss myself, but if it wasn’t for his influence I don’t know what my life would be…He will always be a hero to me.”

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