

Shiva Sister Act

by ELYSE GLICKMAN

Since their first meeting at their sons' preschool 11 years ago, friends Allison Moldo and Danna Black have shared many life-cycle events — births, b'nai mitzvah and even the deaths of close relatives.

Last fall, Moldo, an information technology and mortgage broker, and Black, an event planner, honed their skills to launch a new business intended to help others during trying times: shiva and memorial planning.

They call themselves the Shiva Sisters.

"My uncle passed away two years ago, and my cousin, who was doing all of the planning, told me, 'I wish there was somebody out there who would help me,'" Black said.

A lightbulb went off over her head, Black said. She'd planned corporate events, weddings and bar mitzvahs but had never heard of an event planner specializing in funeral receptions and shivas.

Since their launch last fall, several local synagogues have worked with the duo, and an emerging clientele has developed through word-of-mouth.

"We spent well over nine months meeting with clergy, mortuaries, bereavement counselors and hospice care providers. Given how sensitive this kind of planning is, you cannot just jump into this business," said Moldo, who felt the pressure of funeral and shiva planning firsthand when her father died recently.

The Shiva Sisters take care of such details as catering, rentals, housekeeping, baby-sitting or pet-sitting services, calling minyan service leaders, printing and distributing funeral pamphlets and directions, hotel accommodations and creating reflection videos. The company's services are à la carte, allowing families to tailor memorials to their own needs and the personality of those who have died.

"One thing we have learned is that we're not there to tell people what they should or shouldn't be doing," Black said.

Black's prior experience with vendors, event contracts and associations with people in restaurants and rental companies has been an asset to developing Shiva Sisters as a business, she said.

"While planning is similar to other events in terms of vendors, the tone of a



Allison Moldo
and Danna Black

shiva is different," Black said. "The planning process lasts a few days, in comparison to other events that are planned up to a year in advance. Because we have such strong relationships in food, sites and other areas, we can pull the resources together for a shiva in a day."

In addition to meeting with families dealing with a loved one's sudden death, Moldo said they also have clients who are terminally ill and take the initiative in the planning their own funerals and shivas, including choosing their favorite foods, compiling a video presentation and adding other personal touches that they hope will help their families feel more connected.

Black says that Shiva Sisters also helps connect families with bereavement support — from books and groups to therapists who can help family and friends cope with grief and loss.

Although the consulting fees vary, depending on factors such as the size of the shiva and the number of days their services are required, the Shiva Sisters say most of their clients spend an average of about \$2,500, including food, rental and additional service people.

Moldo and Black believe the comfort

and convenience they provide families is gratifying, even though they admit dealing with death and dying on a daily basis can be trying.

"We deal with sadness, even when people are planning their own memorials or families are dealing with what they have to do in the coming months," Moldo said. "However, after the funeral and at the shiva or reception, friends and family of the person who died are relieved to be there, recall happy memories and be comforted by others who loved the person who died."

Reflecting on a past career filled with happier life-cycle events, Black said she feels like she's come full circle. She also finds her new line of work more rewarding.

"Though the process can be sad and difficult for the clients and emotionally and physically draining for us, we are helping people who need us," she said. "We are bringing people real comfort at a time they need it most. While we cannot relieve them of their grief, we can take away some of the pressure and stress."

For more information about Shiva Sisters, call (310) 447-4123 or visit <http://www.shivasisters.com>. **JF**