

# JEWISH LEDGER

AN INDEPENDENT WEEKLY NEWSPAPER SINCE 1929

## Replica of Anne Frank's hidden annex on exhibit

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Published: Tuesday, October 23, 2007 8:05 PM EDT

HARTFORD—On the first floor of 263 Prinsengracht, a tiny, frosted window opens out to nowhere. A cold and spartan cot lies bereft of soft, human touch. A lonely pillow, once the cradle of sweet dreams, now provides refuge to an abandoned doll. A pink dressing gown is all laid out and waiting, waiting to be worn. From their high heaven on the wall, movie stars gaze from the world of the free into the room a 13-year-old fan, a girl in hiding. Later, her diary, lying on the stark wooden writing table, will pour forth unto the world the beauty, innocence and heart-wrenching tragedy of Anne Frank.

Stepping into the scene above is a recreation by the dynamic team at Charter Oak Cultural Center at Hartford and one is sucked into a world of fear and despair, of cramped spaces and raw nerves, but also of hope and longing, of love and faith, and most of all, the resilience of the human spirit as exemplified by this one, brave little girl.

"The Annex is an ideal place to hide in. It may be damp and lopsided, but there's probably not a more comfortable hiding place in all of Amsterdam. No, in all of Holland," she wrote, of her sanctuary from the Nazis between 1942-44. Anne lived on the first floor; a roughly 400 square feet space that she inhabited with her parents, an older sister, and Fritz Pfeffer, with whom she shared her room.

Like Miep Gies, an employee of Anne's father Otto Frank who guarded his secret, and who looked in on his family everyday, one treads ever so lightly up to the bookshelf in the gallery, behind which lies the family's hidden quarters.

Authentic feel

The exhibit was built in three "full, full, full days" by Chris Phillips of Charter Oak Cultural Center.

"It was very late at night when I was doing the walls, all alone in here, when suddenly I felt the chills and this was all too real," he says, while describing how he put together the entire space based on descriptions and photographs of Anne's hideout in Amsterdam.

"Chris took a historic reproduction and turned it into a piece of art. He painted them [the gallery walls] white, so when people walk in, they say, 'Where's the exhibit?' Then at the end you see the secret bookcase and when you open it, all of a sudden you see color," says Rabbi Donna Berman, the Center's executive director. "It really gives people the sense of hiding. I think there's a metaphor there and we all have a façade that we show to the world. But if you take the time to open it up, there's a whole new world inside. And that's just what prejudice is. Prejudice is just stopping at the surface and not taking the time to really get to know somebody."

Berman says she was inspired to create this exhibit in two bedrooms and a bathroom after she heard of a similar one a few years ago at a Jewish book fair in San Diego.

"As far as we know, it's never been done on the East Coast," she says. The artifacts, on loan from various sources, are all period pieces and from the pin-ups and paintings on the walls to the upholstery on the couch.

"We went to salvage places, to antique stores and churches. The Hartford Family Institute had old doors. I picked up a sink, turned it over and it was [made in] 1955. I picked up another one, turned it over and it said 1925. People who had been to the house in Amsterdam said we've really captured the feel of it," she explains.

She adds, "I feel like Anne has come; her spirit permeates our celebration of Jewish arts and culture."

The self-guided tour of the house begins with a 20-minute documentary and a walk around the gallery along a timeline up to when the family went into hiding. Then, after the house tour, the timeline continues up to what happened to the family after they were arrested. The exhibit is part of the Center's annual celebration of Jewish art and culture.

Berman says owing to the overwhelming interest from the community n including schools and universities n the exhibit will be extended to Dec. 31; it was originally slated to run through Nov. 4. The Center has thus far gifted around 60 copies of "Anne Frank, The Diary of a Young Girl," to school children in Hartford. Berman is seeking donations to be able to gift the diary to children beyond the Hartford region.

The Anne Frank exhibit is open through Dec. 31 at the Charter Oak Cultural Center, 21 Charter Oak Avenue in Hartford. There is a suggested small donation. For more information, visit [www.charteroakcenter.org](http://www.charteroakcenter.org) or call (860) 248-1207.