

Stricken family gets big boost

California donor gives \$63,000 for custom van

By **MARY DIDUCH**
STAFF WRITER

TEANECK – The Herzfeld family, whose four children have the same mysterious degenerative muscle condition, has an extra reason to celebrate this holiday weekend.

A Los Angeles-based philanthropist who read about the family has offered to give the family the money it needs to buy a customized van. The van will allow family members to travel together.

Esther and Arthur Herzfeld's children – Rivka, 23, Tziporah, 22, Tzvi, 18, and Racheli, 15 – all are progressively losing muscle tone and strength, particularly in their legs and arms.

Tzvi, the only son, uses a motorized wheelchair, and his sisters struggle to walk. The condition has stumped about a dozen doctors. The physicians have not been able to pinpoint a cause for the condition, which appears to be hereditary.

The Herzfelds rarely travel together as a family, because doing so requires the parents to lift and place each child in the car – a time-consuming and physically taxing endeavor.

"This is incredibly huge, and it's a huge relief," Esther Herzfeld said. "It's going to make our lives so much easier and less complicated."

In May, the family entered a nationwide contest, sponsored by the National Mobility Equipment Dealers Association, to win a wheelchair-accessible van. The family was named one of four semifinalists last month, but earlier this week family members found out they had not won.

That's when Shlomo Rechnitz, the founder of Brius Healthcare Services, donated \$63,000 toward the purchase of the van, Esther Herzfeld said. The businessman

learned of the news through Vos Iz Neias, a Jewish publication that documented the Herzfelds' story in May, she said.

"They may have lost the contest, but in the end the Herzfelds still won," Rechnitz told Vos Iz Neias.

Brius Healthcare Services is the largest nursing-home chain in California, with 81 facilities. In the past year some of the facilities have become the target of police scrutiny, lawsuits, stiff regulatory fines, and state and federal investigations that have uncovered numerous alleged violations, The Sacramento Bee reported last month.

Esther Herzfeld said the family has not picked a manufacturer for the van, which would have a side ramp, space for Tzvi's motorized wheelchair, and a storage bin on the roof for two lighter wheelchairs that her youngest daughters can use. It is estimated the family will have the vehicle in its driveway in five or six weeks, she said.

"We never could have entertained doing this on our own," said Esther Herzfeld, as the family is more than \$100,000 in debt.

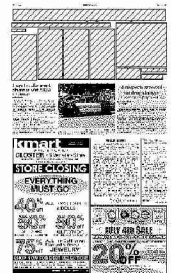
The family remained quiet about its struggles for more than a decade. Eleven years ago, Tziporah was the first to show signs of muscle weakness. Over the years, her siblings also developed similar symptoms.

The family's synagogue, Congregation Beth Aaron, and the Bergen County United Way have helped the family. But the family's story has spread since it entered the van contest. A fund recently set up in the family's name had collected \$127,131 as of Thursday, said Tom Toronto, president of the Bergen County United Way.

The Herzfelds are continuing to renovate their house. The family recently installed a lift to transfer Tzvi from his wheelchair to his

bed. This week, an electrician raised the outlets so the children don't have to bend down to plug something in, and installed a remote-control light switch in Tzvi's room, because he lacks the strength to toggle a traditional light switch, his mother said.

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CHRIS PEDOTA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Arthur and Esther Herzfeld with son, Tzvi, 18, and daughter Rivka, 23. The Herzfelds' four children have a degenerative muscle condition.