

Makom Shelanu debuts Nov. 5

'A Place for Us' will be an inclusive synagogue space

By Deb Silverthorn

Makom Shelanu (A Place for Us) — an inclusive, affirming and safe synagogue space for all — is hosting its first service beginning at 10:30 a.m. on Saturday, Nov. 5, at the First Congregational Church on Trail Lake Drive in Fort Worth and also on Zoom.

"We want to build community across communities," said Cantor Sheri Allen (she/her), who comes to Makom Shelanu after serving as the clergy at Congregation Beth Shalom (CBS) in Arlington for 13 years, and puckmaren glass (they/them).

"It is exciting," adds glass (sic), "to be able to provide a much-needed space where people are celebrated for who they are."

The two met in January 2020 when glass, who was raised outside the Jewish faith, visited Congregation Beth Shalom searching for a soulful connection. Glass attended services, learned to chant Torah and lead services and ultimately chose to convert.

The months went on, the pandemic ensued; away from the physical space of that community, glass and Allen, whose tenure at CBS ended in June, decided to meld their Jewish values and their personal values and to — as they say — "do a thing" together.

That "thing" has become Makom Shelanu, and it is now a reality.

Allen says that since the beginning of the pandemic she'd been paying more attention to the world around her. Observing its happenings and its climate, she realized she'd been living in a bubble before everyone was holed up, and that that was not okay.

"I realized I wasn't focused enough on what was all around me. It really was a wake-up call," she said, "one more powerful than the shofar."

The George Floyd incident, Black Lives Matter, threats to LGBTQ+ rights and a rise in antisemitism motivated Allen to become more involved in social justice and advocacy. "It was a world I knew little about," she said, "but I saw lots of oppression. I knew that as a Jew, as a mother and as a human being I had to do something different, to be something different. What happens to one community is a threat to all communities."

Allen is a member of the Cantors Assembly (CA) and serves on its Ethics Committee. She represents the CA on the Jewish Rohyinga Justice Network and the Strengthening Democracy Committee, a subcommittee of the Conservative Movement's Social Justice Commission. She is also involved in the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism and has served on its Transgender Rights Leadership Committee.

A member of the Circle of Clergy, an interfaith group focusing on racial injustice, and the Inclusive Faith Coalition, an interfaith group in Arling-

ton that advocates for LGBTQ+ rights, she recently participated in the panel discussion "Y'all Means All: Don't Mess with Texas LGBTQ+ Jews," sponsored by ADL Southwest, Keshet and Equality Texas.

Allen has been married to Professor Richard Allen for 38 years. The couple have three LGBTQ+ children — Jeremy (Sam Dubin), Emily (Jesse Weidner) and Preston — whom she refers to as her teachers and inspiration.

Neither Allen nor glass imagined a career in the clergy. After moving to Los Angeles with Richard as newlyweds, she enrolled in an adult b'nai mitzvah program at Congregation Adat Shalom and began leading services soon after. When the family moved to Fort Worth in 1993, she taught religious school and preschool at Ahavath Shalom and then developed the Minyan Mishpacha, a children's service that rotated amongst the area congregations.

Wanting to hone her leadership skills, she enrolled in the Imun program, sponsored by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, which taught lay leaders to fulfill ritual roles. She then pursued and completed the Cantorial Intern Program of the Cantors Assembly (CICA) with the guidance of Hazzan Larry Goller as her mentor.

Glass, who enjoyed church as a child, chose to remain close to the teachings they knew, and attended Seton Hill University, where they majored in music therapy and music education.

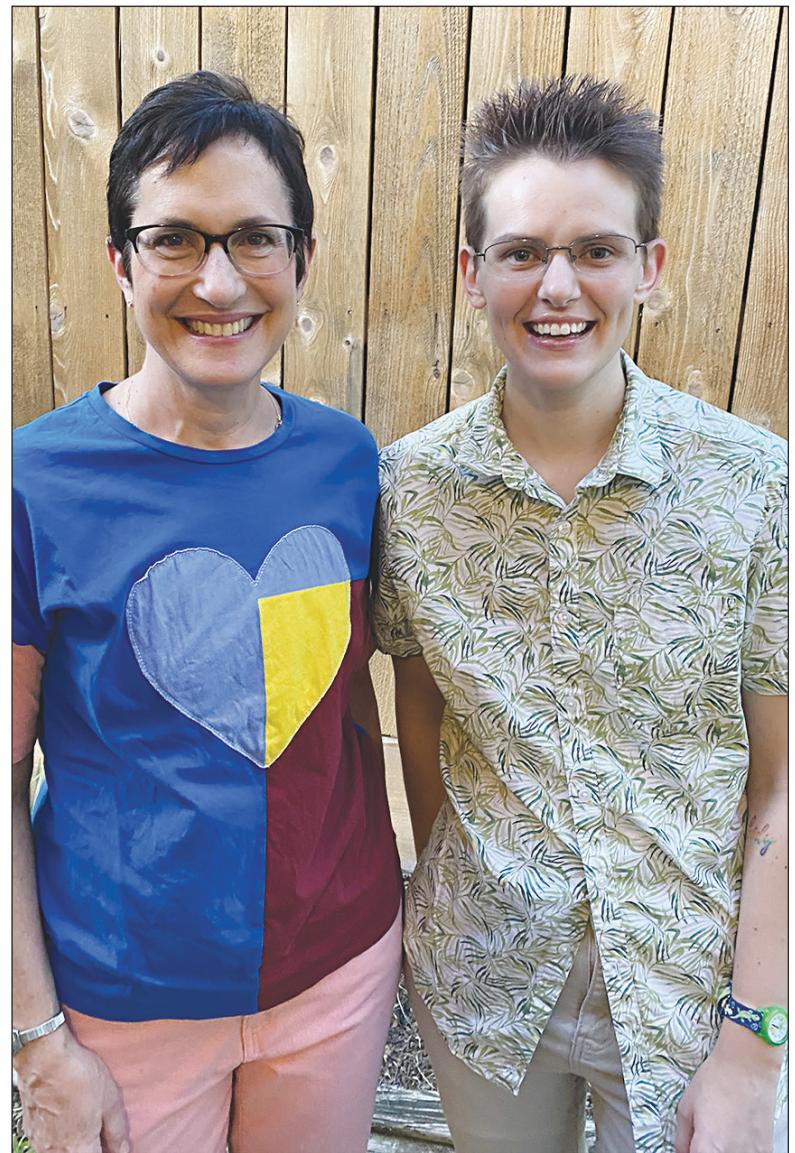


Photo: Richard Allen

"We want to build community across communities," said Cantor Sheri Allen (she/her), at left, who with puckmaren glass (they/them) has founded Makom Shelanu. Its inaugural services begin at 10:30 a.m. on Saturday, Nov. 5, 2022.

They then went on to earn a master's degree in music performance and taught music in public schools.

Glass came to Fort Worth's Brite Divinity School and is completing a Master of Divinity degree. Now, having decided to become a Jew, glass is applying to rabbinical school.

Allen and glass are compiling a prayer book which will employ gender-neutral language within English translations. Those receiving an aliyah will also have a choice of how they want to be called to the Torah: either as *ben* (son of), *bat* (daughter of) or *mi beit* (from the house of).

"We want to honor each participant's choice, or lack thereof, of personal pronouns," said Allen. "We have invited guests to share their names as well as personal pronouns, if they use them, when registering for services."

"We want everyone, from anywhere, and all of their allies to join us in a space of worship, of action and of justice and inclusivity at its core," said Allen. "We'll walk the walk and, to paraphrase Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, we'll 'pray with our feet.'"

For more information, or to register for services or online participation, visit makomshelanu.org.

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