Providing a Path to a Secular Life

By MELANIE GRAYCE WEST

For some within insular ultrareligious environments, there is no clear or easy path to life in the secular world. Providing that support system, and sometimes a path, to hundreds of ultra-Orthodox and Hasidic people is the work of New York-based nonprofit Footsteps.

That desire to forge a new life, pursue an education or a job, is something that is familiar to New York author Anouk Markovits, who recently made a gift of $10,000 in support of Footsteps.

Ms. Markovits, born in Israel and raised in France, was raised in a Satmar Hasidism family. She left her family at age 19 to avoid an arranged marriage, ultimately coming to the U.S. to attend Columbia University’s School of General Studies, from which she graduated. She later went on to earn a master’s degree in architecture from Harvard University and a doctorate in Romance studies from Cornell University. The main theme of her new book, the novel "I Am Forbidden" to be released this May, is Jewish fundamentalism.

"But the people, for example in Williamsburg, don’t even have that kind of basic, strong, education even until they are 14, most of them. So when they want to transition into society at large, they can’t do what I did which is take books and study," says Ms. Markovits.

This is where Footsteps is able to assist. The organization works as a social-services agency, helping individuals—some 200, or so, annually from the city and surrounding communities—to build a new identity. That includes assisting a person if they want to attend a school, find work or seek a new home.

To be sure, some clients come to the organization with "dire social needs," says Lani Santo, the organization’s executive director. Many don’t have a high-school education or are unequipped to enter a modern work environment, let alone visit a restaurant or museum, she says.

To that end, the organization helps its clients to earn a GED or get vocational training, awarding some $60,000 in scholarships in 2011. The nonprofit also organizes social events, including an annual Thanksgiving dinner, something that is a first to many people who come through Footsteps, says Ms. Santo.

Perhaps more importantly, Footsteps works with individuals to counsel them through the difficult choices to leave a community, while helping them to develop a new network of support and friendship.
Ms. Santo says that many clients live at home. Sixty percent are men. She stresses that Footsteps is a secular organization without a religious agenda and "no proselytizing."

"The agenda is to support people's freedom to choose," says Ms. Santo. "We're there for those people for whom this lifestyle isn't working."

Ms. Markovits says that the issue of religious fundamentalism is something that needs to be examined as a society and that helping people to come out of extreme communities is helping society at large.

"I do think that helping people who want to transition out of it goes way beyond empathizing with individual suffering. The stress that they encounter is unbelievable," says Ms. Markovits. "We have to begin to understand what it's like for people who want to come out. They need help."