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Trump didn't pick him as apprentice, but his grandfather is still very proud

By Steven I. Weiss

NEW YORK, June 7 (JTA) – The Orthodox Jewish contestant who almost became Donald Trump's next apprentice isn't going to let his loss in this week's finale get him down.

"I feel great," said Lee Bienstock, the 23-year-old Jewish day-school graduate who was one win away from becoming Trump's next protege on "The Apprentice." Though Bienstock had by many accounts accumulated a stronger record over the course of the reality show's season than his fellow finalist, Sean Yazbeck, his performance in the finale likely cost him the job.

"As far as we're concerned, he won, he just didn't drive away with the car," said Bienstock's father, Mark. "But he already has a convertible, anyway."

Bienstock's appearance on the show, which included missing the tasks for two episodes to observe Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, has nevertheless been an inspiration to many.

"I get e-mails and phone calls from people of all different religions that are so happy that they have someone that's out there that's young who's serving as a role model... from pastors, from rabbis, just all different people from different religions," he told JTA in a phone interview as he prepared to board a plane from Los Angeles, the location of the finale, to his home in New York City.

Other than the holidays, no other element of Bienstock's religious observance made it onto the show, though he says that "any given episode" could have had a running theme: "Lee hasn't eaten the entire time."

Keeping kosher during the show wasn't easy for Bienstock, who said that he lost 20 pounds due to a scraped-together diet of instant soups – the kosher brand he ate, Tradition, got a lot of free publicity on the finale – instant meals like the Labriute self-heating meals and, quite often, not much at all. "It was really, really tough keeping kosher," he said.

"They provided plenty of kosher food in the suite, but we spent so little time in the suite" in the Trump Tower, Bienstock said. "When you're spending 48 hours at a Wal-Mart, there's nothing to eat." While "deep in New Jersey, deep in Queens, where it'd take a half-hour of driving back and forth to get kosher food, I stuck to the task and I kept it to myself. I didn't complain once."

Many viewers noted that in trips to fancy New York restaurants as rewards for winning tasks, Bienstock was shown unhappily picking at salad or a piece of bread – the traditional choices of many an Orthodox business executive.



Even in the amply supplied suite, though, kosher food was occasionally hard to find when other contestants got too hungry.

"We had the bagels for me, it was marked 'pareve' and everybody was eating them," he said, adding that other contestants kept asking the production people if they could eat pareve bagels. "They thought pareve was a brand name, and when I came back, all my kosher bagels were gone."

Pareve refers to food that is neither meat nor dairy.

Nevertheless, sometimes everyone was eating kosher. "If they didn't have any steak and we had kosher steak, I'd let them have my kosher steaks," Bienstock said, adding that the other Orthodox contestant on the show, Dan Brody, is a "good cook," noting that he used to cook a lot of the meals.

While keeping kosher didn't cause any acrimony, his leaving two tasks for the holidays did.

"Some of the others fought about it, but we were always fighting because it's like you're family," he said. "I understood why they were upset, that I didn't participate the way I'd have liked to on those tasks, and I wanted to make up for it," he said, by stepping up to be project manager on an unprecedented four tasks.

It was his willingness to step up and be a leader, he said, that he had hoped would make him a winner on Monday night, but Trump decided otherwise, and was immediately criticized for the decision. "My grandfather rushed the stage – he missed my bar mitzvah but he came in for this – and he ran up to Mr. Trump and said 'You made a big mistake, mister,' " Bienstock recalled.

Despite the loss, Bienstock is already facing a range of new opportunities. "Mr. Trump told me to meet with him next week." He added that he had already received dozens of offers at an after-party following the show. "I'm going to be doing speaking engagements and writing a book," he said.

His first speaking engagement will be at a young leadership dinner at a synagogue near his new home on Manhattan's Upper West Side. He'll be discussing his experiences alongside Brody at the Jewish Center.

If there's any lesson viewers can gain from Bienstock's experience, his father said, it's that it "has just confirmed for him what he's already known, and that's if you want something, you go get it," he said. "We all say that – if you want something, you can go accomplish it – and he's taught us that you really can."

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