

“Making Home in Asheville: How Oral History Celebrates and Sustains Jewish Community”

Rachel Collman
University of North Carolina Asheville
Political Science

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Kenneth Betsalel and Dr. Heidi Kelley
Community Advisor: Rochelle Reich, Jewish Community Center of Asheville

Abstract

Since the time of the Torah, Jewish communities have been tight knit and often at odds with others due to anti-Semitism. After the Holocaust and as a consequence of the Diaspora, Jewish communities evolved in different ways around the world. Throughout American cities, Jewish Community Centers have been established to be a center for Jewish life and learning, offering services for Jews and non-Jews alike.

The Jewish community in Asheville is unique, as it is comparatively small, but active and visible within the broader city and region. By representing multiple denominations of Judaism, including Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Chabad Lubovatch Judaism, the Jewish Community Center of Asheville (JCC) is a place for these different communities to come together as one. The JCC is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year, giving members and the city of Asheville an opportunity to look back to see the evolution of this organization and how it has interacted with the broader Asheville community.

This project explores how different individuals through their involvement with the JCC, limited or extensive, understand the development and history of the Jewish community in Asheville. Oral histories were conducted by interviewing five members of the Asheville Jewish Community over a period of four months. These oral histories will be used during the JCC’s 75th Anniversary year for celebration and commemoration. These records will contribute to a longer-lasting legacy about the importance of the JCC for building community that helps make a home for Jews in Asheville.

Key Words: Judaism, Jewish community, oral history, community.

Origins of the Project

This project begins with my own experience as a Jew living in Asheville. I have reaped the benefits of being part of the Jewish community. My family has always been active at our home synagogue, and my important milestones have been related to my Jewish community. My parents met at my synagogue, where they were married. My sisters and I were named there, and we grew up receiving our Jewish education there. I became a Bat Mitzvah and was confirmed at my synagogue, and I was active in my Jewish youth group through high school. My city did not have a JCC before I moved to college, so my Jewish community was embodied in my synagogue.

When I moved to Asheville for college, the Jewish community was very different from home, so I became part of Hillel, the college group for all Jewish dominations, without venturing too far into the Asheville Jewish community. Over the past few years, I have connected with many Jews in the Asheville area through Hillel, personal relationships, and different synagogues, all with the common denominator of the Asheville Jewish Community Center. Despite the different religious and spiritual experiences I have had through these different mediums, the JCC has been the common thread that has connected these people, places, and institutions through broader Jewish culture. In its 75th year, the Asheville JCC is celebrating an important milestone. The community has changed drastically over the past years, but the JCC has always been a constant for many people in the area.

The emphasis on building Jewish communities in the United States comes from the history of Jewish exile, separation, and diaspora. Diaspora, which is most often specifically Jewish, refers to the “body of Jews living outside the land of Israel,” the homeland of Jewish people, but this term can also refer to “any religious group living as a minority among people of the prevailing religion”.ⁱ The first and most poignant diaspora occurred with the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E. From this point on, Jews did not completely occupy the land of Israel, until 1948 when the Jewish state of Israel was established. Although many contest this state, its independence and international recognition reclaimed the homeland that the diaspora denied many Jews. The establishment of the Jewish state makes a Jewish home a national institution.

Understanding the importance of Jewish community in the United States begins by examining the history of Jewish immigration and assimilation into American society. Historians have divided Jewish immigration to the United States into three different groups: Sephardic, German, and Eastern European. Although Jews of other origins immigrated during these periods, the dominant group had a larger influence on American society. *Sepharad* means “Spanish” or “Hispanic” in Hebrew, and today refers to Jews who follow the Sephardic traditions and customs. In a broader context, Sephardic refers to non-Ashkenazi Jews, or those who have West Asian or North African origin.ⁱⁱ The first Sephardic settlers arrived from Brazil in 1654, and were prominent merchants along the Eastern Coast. By 1730, Ashkenazim, Jews originating from Central and Eastern Europe outnumbered Sephardim. German Jews began to immigrate to the United States in significant numbers during the 1840s. They left Germany due to persecution and hardship, and immigrated to America for opportunity and prosperity, like others before them. German Jews were often peddlers, establishing homes in towns along their routes, helping establish Jewish communities around the United States, making American Judaism a national

faith. Cincinnati is said to be a city of Jewish invention, if there was one, as immigrant Jews flocked to this gateway city to the West. German Jews established institutions along with their communities, including B'nai B'rith, the American Jewish Committee, and the National Council of Jewish Women. After 1880, Eastern European Jews began immigrating in large numbers with similar desire for economic and social opportunity. They settled into major cities in the Northeast and Midwest, in which they each had Jewish sections by the 20th century. Yiddish culture flourished in these immigrant communities as Jews found outlets in art and social justice, as “the plight of the immigrant worker was a common cultural theme.” It was during this time that the link between American Jewry and liberal politics was established, due to Eastern European immigrants’ support for socialist and communist methods to achieve economic and social equality. Eastern European Jews also brought support for Jewish Nationalism and the establishment of a more religiously diverse American Jewish population. ⁱⁱⁱ

Major Jewish immigration ended in 1924, and modern Jewish communities remain an outcome of these waves of Jewish movement. The establishment of a centralized Jewish organizing body came with the creation of the Jewish Community Center Association of North America. The JCCA started with the creation of Hebrew Young Men’s Literary Association in 1854 to “provide support for Jewish immigrants, help ensure Jewish continuity, and to provide a place for celebration.” ^{iv} As immigration increased in the late 19th century, many organizations opened to provide Jews with the tools to adapt to American life, through teaching English, helping with understanding customs, and assisting them with participation in America’s democratic society. The Council of Young Men’s Hebrew & Kindred Associations gave way for the creation of the Jewish Welfare Board, both of which eventually merging to form the Jewish Community Center Association.

With the prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s, Jews had more time and income to spend on leisure and recreational activities. JCCs responded by building modern facilities to serve these suburban populations, by providing children and teen camps, nursery schools, arts and sports programs, and elderly assistance. In 1982, the Committee on Maximizing Jewish Education and Effectiveness (COMJEE) made JCCs prominent sites for Jewish education as seen in programming, adult education, and staff trainings.

The Jewish Welfare Board officially changed its name to the Jewish Community Centers Association in 1990 to better represent its mission. Today it serves more than 350 JCCs, Young Men – Young Women’s Hebrew Associations (YM-YWHA), and campsites. The organization is working to establish connections between local and national Jewish organizations, supporting Jewish culture, community, and education, and engaging all Jews, regardless of age or background, in the Jewish community. ^v

As exile has always been a part of Jewish history, building community is an integral part of Jewish culture. Individuals have come together to provide logistical services, as well as a spiritual, religious, and cultural community. Jewish Community Centers have been a main tool for making home, for Jews in the United States. “Making home” is a term that goes deeper than simply bringing people together. It refers to community building that is both internal and external, for its intended members and those who interact with it.

The Jewish Community Center of Asheville has been the center of Jewish life in Western North Carolina since 1940. The Asheville JCC “strengthens Jewish identity, celebrates Jewish culture and builds community through a wide variety of programs for people from all backgrounds, at every stage of life.”^{vi} The Asheville JCC embodies the five values of *kehilah* (community), *metsuyanut* (excellence), *limud* (learning), *hachnasat orchim* (welcoming), and *tikkun olam* (repair of the world). Jews and non-Jews alike are welcome to be members of the Asheville JCC and are encouraged to build a community that gives members a sense of belonging.

I have been given the opportunity to meet with people to discuss their life in Asheville’s Jewish community and their involvement with the JCC. These community members’ stories have been transcribed to be used in anniversary-year programs, and to keep as records of Asheville’s Jewish legacy. Using community-based stories to celebrate the Jewish Community Center’s anniversary brings the community together and helps create a home for Jews in Asheville,

Methods and Work Undertaken

For this project, my community advisor from the JCC, Rochelle Reich, asked for page-long stories about interviewees’ Jewish life, JCC involvement, and what the Jewish community means to them. The JCC will use these stories for programming and publicity for their anniversary events. The full interviews will be kept in their original audio-recorded form for use in the future, if needed. They will act as a record of these individuals’ stories about the Jewish community they created and were part of through their involvement with the Asheville JCC.

In completing these interviews I was given freedom to conduct them how I saw fit. Each person had the freedom to answer or not answer questions. They could also end the interview at any time. As I was using these individuals’ stories to record oral history, I did not need IRB approval.

I contacted community members based who the JCC wanted to have stories recorded. I contacted a number of men and women, but based on willingness and availability, I could only interview five women. I interviewed Rochelle Reich, Lael Gray, Laurie Chess, Heather Goldstein, and Natalie Kramer from January to March. Each interview was approximately thirty minutes to an hour.

I started and prompted interviews with the questions listed below. These questions were not always asked, as interviewees were free to share and explore any thoughts or stories they chose.

- Name, hometown, occupation
- Please tell me about your Jewish life growing up until now. (Family, Jewish education, memories from Jewish holidays or events, etc.)
- What most strongly characterizes your Jewish life?
- How would you describe your Judaism?
- What do you value in a Jewish community?
- What has been your involvement with the Asheville JCC?
- What is a memorable experience with or at the JCC?
- Why do you think the JCC is important for the community?

- What do you hope or see for the JCC's future?

The first interview was with Rochelle Reich, the community advisor for this project and the Community Life and Events Director of the JCC. She is an integral part of sustaining the Jewish community in Asheville through her role at the JCC. Rochelle grew up with her parents leading an active life, mostly because they created a new synagogue to be more convenient for their community. Early on, Rochelle was more active in her Jewish life because her mother wished her to be, and she did not actively pursue Judaism on her own terms until she was older.

Rochelle moved from Massachusetts after her parents chose to move to Asheville, where her mother felt a rebirth in Jewish life. Rochelle did not immediately seek out a Jewish community, but was drawn to the active and visible Jewish community of Asheville and her own parents' involvement. She realized she wanted to become more involved and the JCC met her personal and professional needs immediately. Rochelle took on roles starting with positions on various committees that lead her to the role she holds now. She feels it is a pleasure to work for the JCC and broader community every day.

There have been challenges during her time at the JCC, especially when her mother died and she did not have her to turn to for answers. She knew she had to learn from others to succeed and is grateful to those who knew when to tell her to take on new positions and go outside of her comfort zone. She credits Heather Goldstein, former JCC Executive Director, for challenging her to grow in her personal Jewish life. To understand more than just what it is and how to be Jewish, Rochelle thoroughly researched why we do Jewish activities, which helped her further solidify her Jewish identity. Rochelle's occupational involvement with the JCC and her personal connections within the Jewish community let her improve the Jewish community of Asheville and foster her own Jewish life.

Lael Gray, the JCC's current Executive Director, was raised in Yonkers, New York, a very diverse community of different groups of immigrants. She attended an Orthodox synagogue, where she felt alienated as a girl who did not have the same access and privileges that her male counterparts did. Her parents did not lead a very religious home, but they were socially active on behalf of Jews and Jewish values. Her mother was a role model for her in terms of standing up for Jewish values, like helping Jews in the USSR at the time and supporting Israel.

Lael attended college at Binghamton University. Similarly to Rochelle Reich, she did not seek out Jewish life because her college community had a large Jewish population. When she moved to Florida with her family, she found a Jewish community that inspired her to become more spiritually Jewish. Her decision to move from Florida to Asheville was heavily influenced by the fact that there were Jews in Asheville thriving through the JCC.

The first thing Lael did after moving to Asheville was to join the JCC. She was not very involved initially but became more interested through her new friend, Natalie Kramer. She found that her new synagogue, Congregation Beth Israel, resonated with the positive aspects of her childhood Judaism. She thinks that the JCC of Asheville truly embodies community, and one that is unique and special. Lael credits the development of the Jewish community to how the JCC operates, as one that welcomes all Jews and non-Jews into the fold of community. She

believes that the JCC helps affirm the Jewish experience, by being a welcoming, like-minded, supportive family.

Laurie Chess, a member of Congregation Beth Israel, and active member of the Jewish community is from Queens, New York, and moved to Asheville in 1978 via San Francisco. She was raised in a Conservative synagogue, but did not seek out a Jewish community in college because she attended Stony Brook University where many other Jews lived near her. When she traveled to Israel as a teen, she was struck by the secular Jewish life that permeates the country.

Laurie sought out the Jewish community in Asheville during her first pregnancy, because it felt intuitive during that life event. Her involvement with the JCC was sparked by her children's needs, as they attended the JCC's preschool, "Shalom," and later on religious school and summer camps. Laurie soon became involved in the Jewish cultural life at the JCC through family events and programming including her favorite, Israeli Folk Dancing.

As a member of the JCC the entire time she has lived in Asheville, Laurie has seen the evolution of the institution and general Jewish community over time. She is struck by the diversity that the JCC attracts, diversity that was not prevalent when she first moved to Asheville. She says that typically JCCs serve an older population, but sees how the Asheville JCC brings together the Jewish and non-Jewish population across many ages.

Laurie is proud of the JCC for the work it does in the community at large. It represents the Jewish community well, and adds to the city's cultural life in general. She is most happy about the way the JCC has served her children, as it has added to their identity as Jews. Laurie feels as though her children have not felt like the minority they are, thanks to the JCC. They have pride in the JCC, and therefore have security in their Jewish identity.

Laurie has created a community for herself through the history and interactions she has had over the years. She feels the sense of community through the relationships she's created and the way the JCC helps the broader Asheville city. It is a happy place for *simchas*, "celebrations" in Yiddish, which bring joy to the community. Laurie Chess knows that broader Jewish community is in good hands because of the JCC. Its outstanding leaders and their passion for fostering Jewish life will keep the Jewish community strong.

Heather Goldstein, a former JCC Executive Director was raised in Asheville and returned to the city after receiving her undergraduate degree at Duke University and her law degree at George Washington in Washington, DC. She was not raised Jewish, but began to explore Judaism in college. Heather spent four years studying and officially converted in 1995. Her Jewish education came with the conversion process, and one of her goals is to become a Bat Mitzvah.

In her sixteen years back in Asheville, Heather has been involved in the Jewish community in countless ways. She was the JCC Executive Director for nine years and has been a member of Congregation Beth Israel since 1999. She started the Maccabee Academy for her children's education, created a chavarah, a group of similar-aged couples with families, supported the Jewish Federation as a donor, and invited UNC Asheville Hillel students to her home. Heather's

involvement and ties to the Jewish community have created the whole texture of her life in Asheville.

Heather's family involvement in the JCC cannot be summarized in a few stories, because almost all of her children's lives have been centered on the JCC. Each of her children started full time at the JCC's daycare at twelve weeks, and have been part of classes, programs, and camps ever since. The JCC has been a place of care and support for Heather's family and have made her children identify very strongly as Jews – something she never guessed would happen. Similar to Laurie's experience, Heather feels like the JCC is a place that have allowed her children not experience life as minority in Asheville.

The JCC is Heather's community home in Asheville. Heather believes that the JCC's presence and work are the glue that holds Jews together across differing religious observance and political views. After traveling to Israel, a place where secular Judaism is natural, she realized that the JCC is that secular Jewish place in Western North Carolina. The JCC embodies Judaism in more than just worship and prayer, but in the work it does for Jews and the broader city. Heather describes the JCC as not just a good place with good people, but her place with her people.

Natalie Kramer has only lived in her hometown of Miami and Asheville. She grew up in Reform Judaism and her Jewish education stopped at her Bat Mitzvah. She was active in the Jewish community in Florida and married a Jewish man. Judaism was always an important part of her life, so she moved to Asheville for the JCC, which comforted her when she first relocated.

In the beginning Natalie was taken under the wing of Marlene Joyce, who became her close friend and mentor. She found others who moved to Asheville for the same reason as her, and together they created a better quality of life through the Jewish community. Natalie was the Membership and Event Director for eight years, and devoted her time to being welcoming to all newcomers to the JCC.

After some time in the private sector, Natalie returned to the JCC out of the love of the community and is now the Volunteer Coordinator. She has been the first Jewish person many people meet and is happy that people come to her to learn what being Jewish means. When someone asks her about the JCC or broader Jewish community of Asheville, she lights up at the chance to share its magic with others. In her role at the JCC and in her personal life, Natalie acts as an ambassador to the Jewish community to help others understand Jewish culture and know that being Jewish is cool. She strongly believes, like many others, that presenting the Jewish community as being accessible and supportive to all is the best way to combat anti-Semitism.

Natalie equates the JCC to a living room: a place just to be Jewish and celebrate culture. There are many ways to celebrate Jewish identity, and the JCC is the place to do it. It is a loving, embracing environment for people of all sorts to be part of a community. Through her work and involvement at the JCC, she knows that is everyone's job to continue Jewish culture and be inclusive for all people, and she is ready to continue that for the foreseeable future.

These women's stories have common themes. They have turned to the Jewish community in times of need, and the JCC has provided them services, support, and comfort. Their ties to the

JCC come from the personal connections they have made with mentors, friends, and other families. They also see the value of the JCC not only sustaining Jewish life, but also bridging the gap between Jews and non-Jews to help the broader community and combat anti-Semitism in Asheville.

Ties to Academia

The methodology for this project stemmed from Political Science course with Dr. Ken Betsalel, ReStorying Community. This course was service-oriented, and had students work with the Burton Street community of West Asheville. In the classroom, we examined methods to connect with people and help sustain community through individuals' and broader community-based stories. In the community, we worked with individuals like the Burton Street Community Center's coordinators and Asheville Parks and Recreation employees to not only help the community, but also to understand its form and function.

In this course, Dr. Bestalel used political theory to explain the importance of sharing the community-based stories to create community. The individual story is an important tool for linking a single person to a broader community. By sharing community members' story, they invest in the wellbeing of the community unit. The process of sharing his or hers story is an outlet for the individual to examine their role and position in the community. Voicing the individual story creates common ground among many, making a singular experience, a collective one that builds and sustains community.

bell hooks is an author and educator, whose writing about creating community is extremely relevant to Asheville. She has also visited Burton Street for the inception of its community Peace Garden. In *Teaching Community*, hooks individuals to embrace the values that stimulate social change. She explores and teaches how to bring education outside the classroom to organize community change. hooks relies heavily on her own experience as a black woman to explain racism and sexism and how it devalues all people. As her book states, "teaching community means "to work against the effects of socialization and to resist even the subtle ways"^{vii} reinforce discrimination and hatred. hooks' methodology relies on the voices of others, as she explicitly states, "this book does not belong to me alone...It is the outcome of life-transforming dialogues that take place in the context of community-building."^{viii} Starting in the introduction and throughout *Teaching Community*, hooks uses the personal narrative to teach how to build community in her book, and in turn do the same in reality. By sharing these community-based interviews and the individuals' stories, hooks gives legitimacy to their experiences and includes them in the process of making home.

hooks' writing promotes using community-based stories as a means of creating community. Her example gives a methodology for collecting these stories and examples for how it will influence the process of community building. This project with the JCC puts into practice hooks' methodology, and uses the stories collected to create home for Jews in Asheville through community-based storytelling.

Anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff offers a different story of community in *Number Our Days*. She explores the positives and negative aspects of an elderly community of Jews from Venice, California in the Aliyah Senior Citizens' Center. Myerhoff shares the histories of these individuals and the rituals that bring them together. In this home for the elderly, these individuals face neglect, loneliness, poverty, and inadequacy of health care and housing. But the culture they share and the community they created gives them the support to face these challenges together.

The Center's community shares a similar Jewish history as the Asheville JCC, as The Center's community is made up of Jews from the "Old World," with similar Ashkenazi heritage. In contrast to what Asheville Jews relaying in their interviews, they still hold onto many of the old practices they had from Europe, which is probably due to the generational differences between these two communities. Myerhoff describes them as "wishing to be modern, rational and without superstition,"^{ix} but many of them still believe in the magical forces, specifically cursing. These immigrants may have assimilated into American life to an extent, but they now have created a community that is similar to the *shtetls*, small towns with traditional Jewish populations in Eastern Europe, where they can conduct a fully Jewish life in their assisted living home that can be separate from the broader American society. As the subtitle of this book says, this community is a "triumph of continuity and culture among Jewish old people in an urban ghetto," but this offers an alternative way of preserving culture that differs from the work of Jewish Community Centers.

The elderly population in *Number Our Days* lives in an assisted living home, an American creation that is notorious for exclusion from society. Throughout the book, Myerhoff reminds the reader that these seniors do not have significant interaction with those outside the Center, especially with family. This differs from the experience that the Asheville JCC promotes, which focuses on inclusion.

The Asheville JCC does not exclude Jewish life from Asheville; it actively integrates Jewish culture in Asheville culture and vice versa. The JCC works to foster Jewish life and culture, while also integrating it into the fabric of American culture. The JCCA has modernized over the decades as it has adapted to the needs of Jewish communities which includes adjusting to the assimilation of Jews into American culture. The community centers do not limited membership or use of its programs and facilities to just Jews members – it is open to all. Whereas the community of Aliyah Senior Citizens' Center may attempt at preserving Jewish culture by keeping its rituals and happenings internal, the JCC of Asheville extends its reach to all community members. This is not to say that either method is better for sustaining Jewish culture, just that each serves the population it encapsulates differently.

At the Center, like all social groups, there are leaders and followers who form smaller groups within a larger community, which create rifts between individuals. Myerhoff's examination offers a perspective of dissent at the Center, which I did not find within Asheville's community, though I am sure it does exist. Myerhoff states, "In the Center, as in small societies of intimates – bands, clans, tribes, communes, and extended families – people's ties are complex, highly intertwined, and very charged emotionally."^x These 'societies of intimates' are created among

people who share common purposes, interests, or in the Center's case, heritage, so they are bonded by a collective history that may differ slightly among the individuals.

Among the members of Asheville's Jewish community, there is a shared history as Jews, which creates an immediate connection among its members. The same connections are made among the Jews in Myerhoff's book. Her exploration of the Aliyah Center was much more in-depth and long-term than my exploration of the Asheville JCC, but there is most likely similar dissent among Asheville Jews. Although I was only focusing on the positive memories of the JCC, as this was a project for its anniversary, dissent is an integral part of any community.

Myerhoff explains in Chapter Five that this "was a community sewn together by internal conflict, whose members were building and conserving their connections using grievances and dissension."^{xi} Members of the Center remarked that dissent was fulfilling a Jewish stereotype that reigns true, but also because, as one community member stated, "We must fight to keep warm. That's how we survive."^{xii} Dissent can be perceived as a negative aspect of community building, but it is necessary for creating a home where all voices are heard and represented. Dissent may have not been included in these understood as interviewees this project was to celebrate the JCC's anniversary and how it brings people together, rather than explore tensions in the community.

Community-based stories give the individual the chance to share their experiences with the rest of the community. Members who shared their story add to the act of community-building. Whether those experiences are positive or negative, they contribute to understanding what the role of community is for individuals. Although I was not asking interviewees about their negative experiences with the JCC, the act of sharing their story helps to sustain the community by contributing to its legacy.

Challenges Faced and Responses to those Challenges

The challenges were mostly logistical with coordinating with interviewees. It was difficult to organize meetings with many people's job hours and my schedule as a student. Almost every recommended interviewee was willing to be interviewed, but some denied because they wanted to maintain privacy.

Another challenge came with not overlapping with another community member who was completing his own JCC anniversary project. He was using his multi-media business to make a short film to celebrate various aspects of the JCC. His project was not contracted by the JCC, and he was doing it for free. We met to make sure there was no overlap in our two projects, so that I would not intrude upon the project that he had been investing his own resources, time, and business to complete. He was creating a video to share community stories about specific JCC events and places of the past, whereas my project was collecting oral histories about the general feeling of community among JCC members. I responded to this challenge by meeting in person to make sure there was not conflict between our separate, but similar, projects. Although this left a smaller amount of people for me to interview, it was all the JCC needed.

Results

This project illustrated four major themes that both help characterize this community and illuminate broader concepts of community and engagement.

Themes:

5.1 Community-based Stories as a Means of Community-building

People connect to their communities through their experiences. Drawing upon people's actual experiences connects them to the rest of the community because it gives voice to their own story and helps them find common ground with others, and in turn building community. The act of interviewing these community members allowed them to share personal stories and solidify their answers to these broad concepts and questions about community.

Heather Goldstein shared her story of converting to Judaism and choosing to return to her hometown of Asheville because she knew of the JCC and vibrant Jewish community. When she committed to her Jewish identity and living a Jewish life, she brought that passion to her various roles in the community, most explicitly as the JCC's executive director. By sharing her journey from non-Jew to convert, and her process of no involvement to leading the JCC, she reinforces her own experience and allows others to connect with her story.

People make the community they live in, and their sharing their story allows them to express their experiences and in turn shape their community. The stories individuals' shared with me will help sustain the connections and relationships that keep this community alive.

5.2 Multifaceted Benefits of Jewish Community based on Personal Lived Experiences

Many people stated that the Asheville Jewish Community Center provided a service or environment that they needed at the time they joined. For some, the community supported them financially, but for others it was a spiritual, social, religious, or cultural attraction that made them become involved. The JCC provides outlets for different people to create a home with those who are like-minded regarding the importance of creating a strong Jewish community.

Many interviewees lived in other places where they learned what they liked and didn't like in a Jewish community, so they established what they wanted when they settled in Asheville. Their lived experiences contributed to their desires for community. Lael Gray found the spiritual aspect of feminist mysticism in her Floridian Jewish community, but wanted more in terms of cultural Judaism and support when she arrived in Asheville. Her needs were met when she joined the JCC, and as she contributed to the JCC's leadership in various roles. The people who have worked on interpersonal and institutional levels to create a healthy environment to foster Jewish life all bring their own lived experience to the work.

5.3 Multifaceted Needs of Jewish Community:

The Jewish community of Asheville is unique due to its place in North Carolina and its position in Jewish history. Western North Carolina does not have a large Jewish population, like cosmopolitan centers that were popular Jewish immigration destinations. Despite having a

smaller Jewish population, the Jewish community of Asheville is very visible and active. With events like Hardlox, celebrating Jewish culture and food each fall, and the Falafel 5K, the JCC puts on many events for Jews and non-Jews to experience.

The community is continued through different voices coming together to work, learn, and live together. The JCC is an institution that sustains the Jewish experience and promotes Jewish life, which is necessary to keeping the broader Jewish community of the world alive. Individuals who work at the JCC and have participated in this project understand the importance of these communities' continuation and where their personal stories fit into that perpetuation.

From the perspective of the institution, rather than from the perspective of its members, the JCC has different needs. To continue to provide for the JCC's members, members must contribute to provide for the institution's needs. The most obvious method would be through financial support, which all community-based institutions need. This could be through continued membership and the dues that are involved, but this could also be through donations and fundraising. To continue to provide for its members, members also need to contribute to the institution's needs. Members like Heather Goldstein and Laurie Chess mentioned that they were donors of the Jewish Federation, showing that they include their financial support as part of their community involvement.

A less obvious method is to support the JCC's through its visibility in the broader community. Attending events, bringing non-Jews to support, and preserving a positive image of the JCC, as its members will solidify its role in the community. As Natalie Kramer stated that the JCC presents the Jewish community as being accessible and supportive to all, which is the best way to combat anti-Semitism. If members of the community continue to support the JCC in many capacities, they also continue to combat anti-Semitism. It is possible that this project will provide for some of these needs, as it can help make Jewish community members, more accessible to the rest of the community by sharing their stories.

Sustainability

This project was constructed around the needs of the Jewish Community Center for its 75th anniversary year. The product created for the JCC will be used for this year in the form of promotional materials and as member profiles, but could be used in future programming as well. The project could be sustained if the JCC chooses to continue collecting stories from community members. Other students could continue this project, but staff at the JCC could also work on it, if they feel it is helpful and necessary.

On a broader level, this project could be a surveying tool for the JCC, to have feedback from the community about its programs and services. The current format that only interviews JCC supporters would have to be altered to include dissenting opinions to give well-rounded, fair, and useful feedback. Community-based interviews go past a simple survey and could allow the JCC to hear more from their members if the center is serving them. This project could be a tool that gives members the opportunity to give feedback on the type of community the JCC creates, which would allow them to personal it to their own cultural, spiritual, and logistical needs.

Conclusion

Through these interviews, it is clear that members of the Asheville Jewish community use the JCC for the tangible services and the social support it provides. The JCC has been an integral part of these five women's lives at important milestones and at less noteworthy times. Their families have been part of the JCC's schooling, summer camps, cultural programming, and holiday festivities. The JCC has helped families financially, emotionally, and with assimilating to Asheville.

As one of the first institutions many of these women joined when they moved to the city, it can be said that the JCC provided a familiar home in an unfamiliar place. The values the Asheville JCC upholds of *kehilah*, *metsuyanut*, *limud*, *hachnasat*, *orchim*, and *tikkun olam*, help build a community for Jews and non-Jews to be proud of. Although the services provided by JCCs have changed since their inception, the Asheville JCC is still an institution that continues Jewish learning, building Jewish community, and cultivates Jewish identity.

In its 75th year, the Asheville JCC celebrates how far it has come since 1940 and commemorates the home it has made for the Jews in Asheville. Making home is not simply creating a single space, but establishing a place where public and private lives intersect. The Jewish community is embodied by the work of the JCC and increases the radius of home for Jews and non-Jews alike. Finding one's home at the JCC means finding one's home in Asheville and Western North Carolina.

References

- ⁱ Diaspora. (n.d.). Retrieved March 1, 2015, from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/diaspora?s=t>
- ⁱⁱ Sephardic Jews. (n.d.). Retrieved March 1, 2015, from Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Zollman, J. (2002, August 17). Jewish Immigration to America: Three Waves. Retrieved March 1, 2015, from <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-immigration-to-america-three-waves/>
- ^{iv} The JCC is Asheville's Jewish Neighborhood. (n.d.). Retrieved March 1, 2015, from <http://www.jcc-asheville.org/about/>
- ^v The JCC is Asheville's Jewish Neighborhood. (n.d.). Retrieved March 1, 2015, from <http://www.jcc-asheville.org/about/>
- ^{vi} The JCC is Asheville's Jewish Neighborhood. (n.d.). Retrieved March 1, 2015, from <http://www.jcc-asheville.org/about/>
- ^{vii} Hooks, B. (2003). In *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. New York, New York: Routledge.
- ^{viii} Hooks, B. (2003). In *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. New York, New York: Routledge.
- ^{ix} Myerhoff, B. (1978). *Number Our Days*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- ^x Myerhoff, B. (1978). *Number Our Days*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- ^{xi} Myerhoff, B. (1978). *Number Our Days*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- ^{xii} Myerhoff, B. (1978). *Number Our Days*. New York: Simon & Schuster.