

CELEBRATING OUR STORIES
Jewish Life in Ann Arbor

Chuck and Sharon Newman
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6:40-14:20

Sharon: Our really main involvement was in founding the Jewish Community Center. We were on a mission trip to Israel in, I'm thinking it was 1983 or 1984. We were paired—people from Ann Arbor paired with a community in Connecticut. Do you remember whether, was it Hartford?

Chuck: Yes.

Sharon: Okay. They were about the size of Ann Arbor, and the people on this trip were talking about their Jewish Community Center. We were thinking, "Well, why can't we do that in Ann Arbor?" When we got home we started to put things in motion to create a Jewish Community Center. First intending to have what they would call a center without walls where we would just rent rooms or something to have meetings to do things.

The Jewish Nursery School had to leave the Hillel building where it was Beth Israel Nursery School, but it was meeting in Hillel which actually was where Beth Israel was meeting at the time. They needed, Hillel needed the space, so we had to vacate. Irv Smokler was able to let us use a building of his on East Stadium, so our center without walls became a center with a building. We started by what we called our breakfast club which would meet on Sunday mornings frequently to plan—

Chuck: I hate to interrupt—

Sharon: [*Cross Talk 08:13*]—

Chuck: - you. I'm gonna—

Sharon: What?

Chuck: - let our little secret.

Sharon: What?

Chuck: We met on Shabbat.

Sharon: We met on Shabbat, okay.

Chuck: We met on Saturday.

Sharon: It was Saturday morning, so okay.

Chuck: We didn't talk about that.

Sharon: Okay [*laughter*]. It was Chuck and I, my brother Mel Muskovitz, Irv Smokler, Herb Amster, Mike Levine and Larry Smith would meet—Reuben Bergman and Reuben Bergman—would meet quite frequently to get things moving. I'm gonna let you take on from there.

Chuck: Sure. Can't really elaborate it, maybe add some other things to the timeline. Going back to the mission trip where we first had the idea that Ann Arbor could use a Jewish Community Center. Unlike Sharon, I didn't have any Jewish friends growing up. We were, I was the only Jewish kid in my graduating class at Wayne Memorial High School. That was a class of several hundred students. This Jewish identity came a little bit later to me and that, as I said, was triggered primarily by the 1967 war.

While we were on this trip we had a number of lecturers, which is common on a mission trip. One of whom was an economist and pointed out the importance of keeping our local Jewish community strong because that for all the good that our philanthropy did in Israel, the government aid from the US government was critically important. It was very important that the communities, the Jewish communities in the United States, be strong as well.

A little bit about the history of the Jewish community in Ann Arbor—at least from my perspective—and that is there was a lot of discrimination in Ann Arbor if one goes back far enough. In fact, I was a little surprised to find out even in 1958, when I was a freshman, there was a quota of only two Jewish professors in the law school. As a consequence the organized Jewish community, again in my opinion, kept a very low profile in Ann Arbor. Its philanthropy went towards supporting Israel.

It was with enormous difficulty that our local community fundraising organization, at that point called the United Jewish Appeal, agreed to keep ten percent of the money it raised in Ann Arbor for local needs to develop the community. Of that ten percent they counted the scholarships for Jewish youth to go to

Israel. The idea of diverting funds from overseas philanthropy, I knew, was going to be very challenging. Indeed, the old Jewish Community Council—I was treasurer of that. I think I was treasurer of most of the Jewish organizations at one point in my career. Did a survey to see what it was that the community needed. In damn near last place was a central meeting place.

I knew it wasn't going to be easy for the established organizations—which again, showing my prejudice and bias—was dominated by academics who are often goodhearted and very accomplished talkers. As a business man—by that time I was in business for myself—I would find the emphasis on talking, as opposed to doing, frustrating. I knew that we would never get approval to do a Jewish Community Center by going through the established communal organizations. The strategy therefore was to meet initially individually and privately with the major funders of the community to get their approval for having a Jewish Community Center.

Once that was obtained I went to the rabbis—Rabbi Kensky and Rabbi Levy—who also generously and enthusiastically supported the concept of a community center, even though their lay leadership was very much not in favor of it at that time. The not uncommon refrain we heard was, "There's only so many resources in this community, financial leadership, and you're just going to dilute it." Well, Sharon and I had a bigger vision, as did the people who we attracted which was we were gonna bake a bigger pie.

Which I am thrilled to say that not only has the community center been a tremendous success in its own right—as we rather anticipated—it turned out to be a feeder where marginally-identified Jewish couples could enter the Jewish community, typically through their children and the nursery school. The subsequent leadership of the Jewish community, to a very large extent, came from couples who enrolled their kids in the early learning center—the nursery school—became involved in the leadership of that, and then graduated up. We're gonna take a tiny bit of credit here for the blossoming of the Jewish community in Ann Arbor and making a transition from one dominated by the academics, who were sending all of our money to Israel, to something that has a larger vision.