

PROFILE JENNY BLAIR

As we've all learned after 15+ months of living with pandemic restrictions, it is vital to be able to adapt successfully to ever-changing conditions. Meet Jenny Blair, a newcomer to our congregation, who is no stranger to adapting to change.

Consider:

- she was born to atheist non-Jewish parents and is now an observant Jew;
- she grew up in a politically and socially conservative milieu, but is now on the other side of that spectrum;
- she trained and worked as a doctor, but then became a journalist and writer who has also worked as a farmhand, pedicabber and tour guide.

Jenny was born in Santa Barbara, California in 1975 when her father was a resident in at Stanford. Three years later her parents moved the family back to their native hometown of Saginaw, Michigan, a rust-belt city about 100 miles northwest of Detroit. Her father is a practicing cardiologist; her mother runs his practice and is an award-winning gardener as well as a writer and equestrian. She has a younger sister named Elisabeth. Though raised Catholic, her parents left the church, and the girls had a secular and politically conservative childhood.

After graduating from high school in 1993 Jenny ventured east to attend Yale University. She made many Jewish friends among her fellow students, attended Shabbat dinners and other Hillel activities, and began to feel at home in the Jewish world.

During her undergraduate years, Jenny incorporated one year at the University of Michigan and one in South Florida in the employ of James "The Amazing" Randi, a magician and escape artist who had begun a foundation to challenge paranormal and pseudoscientific claims. Upon returning to Yale, Jenny earned her BS with distinction in geology and geophysics in 1999. She entered Yale Medical School in 2000. Along with her medical education she wrote an award-winning column for *The Hartford Courant*.

In 2004 Jenny underwent a kosher Conservative conversion in New York City under the guidance of Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, one of the authors of *The Jewish Catalog*. "I don't really call it conversion, though, since I had no religion before," she says. "I felt as though I immigrated or joined a family."

Jenny completed her emergency medicine residency at the University of Chicago Medical Center, which included working as a helicopter transfer physician. While in Chicago she attended Anshe Sholom, an Orthodox synagogue – "a lovely experience," she recalls, "but then I discovered feminism – a challenge to my living Judaism!"

Over the next several years she worked part-time in emergency rooms in Illinois, Connecticut and Maine, and part-time as a writer. In 2010 she married an architect and the couple moved to

Indonesia, where they volunteered with Health in Harmony, a nonprofit that recognizes the links among deforestation, poverty and lack of access to health care in rural areas. There Jenny trained young Indonesian physicians in patient care and diagnosis, and grew deeply interested in low-resource medicine, writing a blog on the subject.

When she and her husband returned to the US the following year, she stopped practicing medicine. “I loved caring for patients,” she says, “but hated the attendant stress and lack of sleep, as well as trying to function amid the deep problems in American health care. I decided to hang up my stethoscope.”

But her husband had grown interested in switching to a medical career, so they came to Vermont so that he could take UVM’s pre-med course. They lived in Winooski and Jenny wrote for *Seven Days* and *New Scientist*, among other publications. She also served as a preceptor at UVM’s medical school and joined Ohavi Zedek. With a growing interest in local food systems and people-powered transport, she worked to haul farmshares via bicycle from the Intervale to locations around the Burlington area – discovering that the steep hill out of the Intervale was no joke!

At her husband’s behest, she moved with him in 2012 to Austin, Texas. There she continued to develop her writing career, reporting on local transportation and water issues and landing bylines in *Discover*. (A side hustle as a pedicabber was unprofitable because, as during her medical career, she couldn’t bear the night shift!) The couple separated in 2014, leading to Jenny’s relocation to Michigan and their subsequent divorce.

She began learning about permaculture, a set of design principles that help humans imitate the natural world to build long-lasting regenerative systems. Immersing herself over three years in courses and farm work, she learned the skills and principles related to observing the natural world, then working with it to foster systems that care justly for the earth and human communities and adapt to climate change exigencies. That included learning about woodworking, blacksmithing, foraging edible plants, thatching roofs, and even scything. She also began educating herself on racism and working to adopt anti-racist practices, as well as other key topics such as queerness, class issues, mass incarceration and practices of mutual aid.

In 2017, remembering her good experience in Winooski, Jenny moved back to Vermont, and her sister soon followed. Elisabeth settled in Burlington, where she works in UVM’s Staff Council Office while pursuing a parallel career as a poet and poetry consultant. Jenny lived first in White River Junction, then Montpelier, hatching plans to begin a permaculture homestead. She took Vermont’s Master Composter course, studied soil biology and wrote for *Seven Days* about Living Tree Alliance, a co-housing project in Moretown that cultivates Earth-based Judaism.

In 2018 Jenny decided she needed a partner to share her permaculture dream. Alas, she found that the dating scene in Central Vermont was less than hopping. So she moved to Brooklyn. “Though I didn’t find a partner there,” she says, “I did find wonderful friends and

opportunities, including a visiting professorship at SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University and food-and-permaculture-related work.” She helped teach composting techniques on Governors Island off the southern tip of Manhattan, working as well as a tour guide and educator at a hydroponic herb-and-flower farm in TriBeCa.

Then the pandemic hit. After experiencing COVID’s horrifying springtime assault on New York City, which felled many of her near neighbors, Jenny returned to Vermont in the fall of 2020 to share an apartment in Burlington with Elisabeth, who had married a Canadian but is not yet able to join her husband in Canada. Jenny renewed her membership in OZ and is exploring what it means to be a queer, egalitarian and observant Jew in Burlington. “Dating remains a challenge,” she notes.

Employed part-time by a company that delivers business intelligence about medical devices, Jenny continues to lead workshops remotely at SUNY and pursues freelance work. Recently she interviewed fellow OZ member David Kaminsky, MD about a recent medical research study. The article appeared in *MedPage Today*.

Having learned a thing or two about structural justice related to race, gender, sexual orientation, class and other factors, and having witnessed and experienced the power of neighbors directly supporting one another, Jenny is a strong advocate for mutual aid, both within and beyond the Jewish community. She is active with Burlington’s Food Not Bombs, engaging in frequent neighborhood mutual aid and meal prep, and studies Talmud, Yiddish and cartooning in her spare time. She also gardens and co-hosts weekly Shabbat dinners on her porch with family, friends and neighbors. Her inspiration comes from modern-day anarchist efforts, as well as early twentieth-century Workmen’s Circle initiatives that saw Jewish immigrants strongly supporting one another.

Since Jenny came back to the synagogue during COVID, she has had little opportunity to mingle in person with many of us; however, her passions, skills and Jewish practices have helped her connect in a variety of ways with a number of congregants. Among them:

David Brown, who has been hosting a virtual chat session at noon every Thursday. David says of Jenny, “She is one smart cookie! She’s widely read, is a great conversationalist with something wise to say on whatever topic comes up. Her focus is mostly on issues that need to be addressed in the local community.”

Nancy Sugarman, who met Jenny through social action initiatives. Nancy observes that “Jenny is dedicated to community building and mutual aid. She lives her values in her volunteer work with informal food networks, steering Zoom services, and hosting her outdoor Shabbat potlucks, held rain or shine! She celebrates the affirming possibilities in people and calls out waste and negativity.”

Grace Oedel, former Executive Director at OZ and current Executive Director of NOFA (Northeast Organic Farming Association). Grace, who has worked for years at the intersection

of permaculture, farming and education, notes that “Jenny is incredibly passionate and knowledgeable about Judaism’s connection to place, agriculture and justice, all wrapped together.” Noting that the Jewish calendar is connected to agricultural cycles, she adds, “I have found it so refreshing, inspiring, and connective to talk, learn and cultivate a Jewish practice and community rooted in a commitment to the earth and each other with Jenny. Food and farming is the nexus where social and environmental justice meet, and a sweet spot where Judaism really blossoms!”

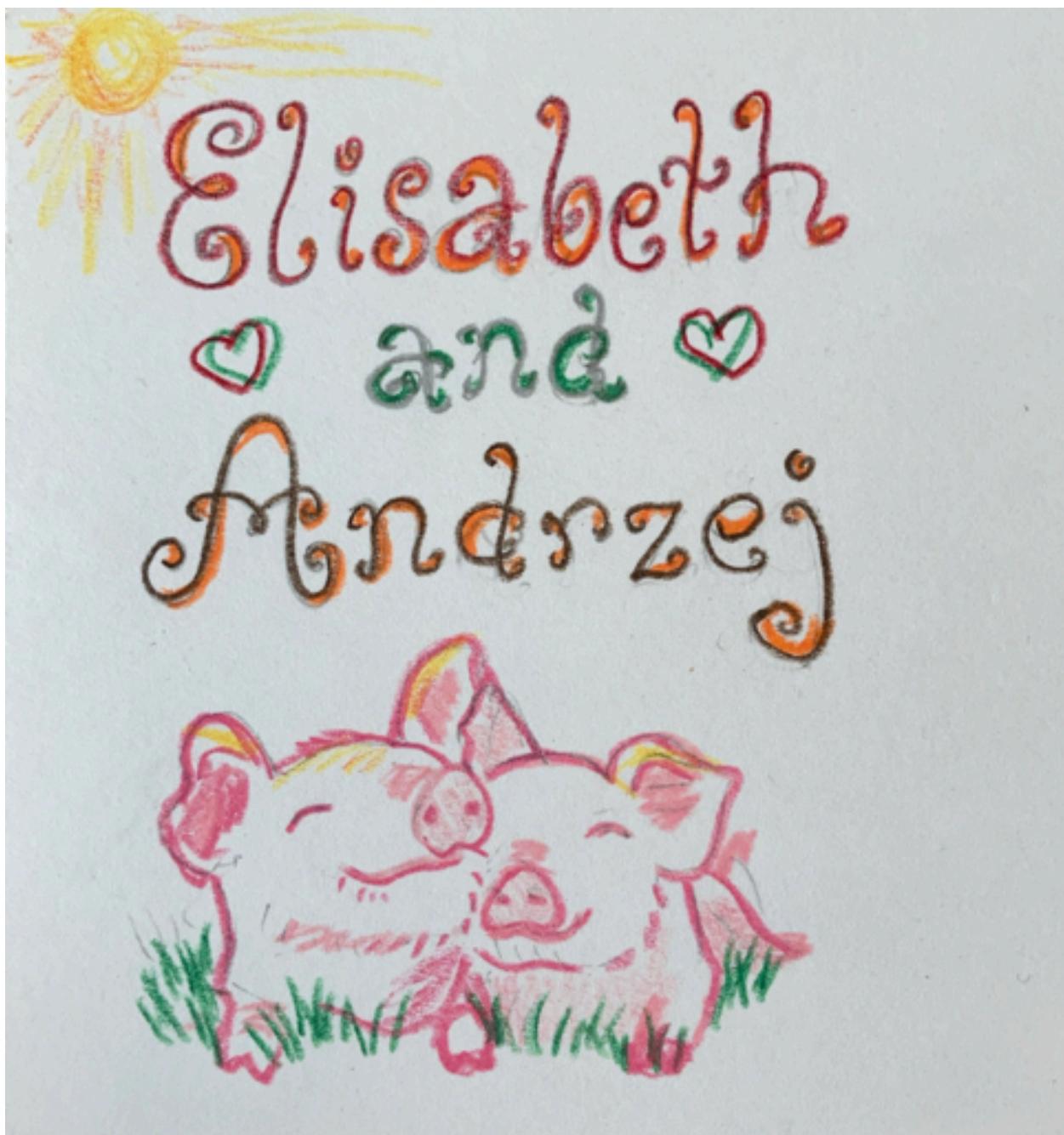
In so many ways Jenny exemplifies the spirit and goals of OZ’s Imagine 2025 initiative, with its emphasis on family and friendship, our mutual support of one another, helping to meet people’s needs in the community and ensuring their security, and respecting and caring for the earth....all viewed through a Jewish lens. “Jenny brought a great deal of energy and new thinking forward during the development of 2025,” says Yoram Samets, a member of the Imagine team. “Her perspective on younger unaffiliated Jews was important to our process. And she will hopefully play a role in helping us do a better job as we enhance our outreach efforts to a younger Jewish audience. We need more Jenny Blairs at OZ!”

We are indeed lucky to have her in our congregation. And, to confirm Nancy’s assertion that among Jenny’s myriad talents she is a “wicked good cartoonist,” see below.

~ *Judy Hershberg*



Self-Portrait



Jenny's drawing on the occasion of her sister's wedding