

PROFILE Molly Ritvo

Every weekday morning Jason Stuffle, an IBM research engineer, brings his 3-year-old daughter Jimi to Full Circle Preschool via bicycle from their residence on Colchester Avenue. Though he's now working from home, Jason has in the past continued to pedal on to the IBM facility in Essex Junction, and he looks forward to doing so again once 'normal' life resumes. Jimi's mom, Molly Ritvo, picks her up by car (hopefully by bike soon, she says) at the end of the school day. While adhering to stringent COVID guidelines, Full Circle has been functioning at full strength throughout the pandemic, so our preschoolers' routine has remained unchanged. In fact, Molly says, "Jimi has had a wonderful social life over the past year, unlike most of us."

OZers who were around in 2008 will remember Molly Ritvo, whose first job in Burlington was as Membership and Outreach Coordinator here at the synagogue. Hired by then-Executive Director Mike Kanarick, she shared front office space with then-Secretary Anouk McKenzie. Though new to town, Molly was not a newcomer to Vermont, having been raised in Montpelier. "I'm not really a full-fledged Vermonter, though," she confesses. "I was born in 1983 at Dartmouth Hitchcock in New Hampshire. I guess my secret is out...."

Molly's parents, Marjorie and Jim Ritvo, both from Newton, MA, left the suburbs of Boston to start a new life in Vermont after they married. Her mom's family had emigrated from Lithuania; her dad's roots, Molly believes, are probably Sephardic. "If you run across a Ritvo anywhere, that person is most likely a relative of ours," she says.

Marjorie's background is in education and psychology. A kindergarten teacher early in her marriage, she went back to school when Molly was a toddler to earn a graduate degree in clinical psychology from St. Michael's College, and subsequently ran a successful private practice in psychotherapy in Montpelier. Jim earned his undergraduate degree from Tufts University, a Master's in urban planning from St. Louis University, and a law degree from Boston University College of Law. He was a lawyer with a deep commitment to social justice. "His mother, my grandmother Mikki Ritvo, was a huge force in my dad's life," Molly says. "She was an early feminist and one of the first deans of Smith College." Jim, a public defender, had been a VISTA volunteer and an advocate for prison reform. In Montpelier he specialized in helping families negotiate the legal system. One of the founders and former President of Woodbury College (which later merged with Champlain College), he also had a weekly interview show on local cable access TV and went on to become a documentary film maker.

The Ritvos were beloved citizens of their small community and its warm, nurturing synagogue, Beth Jacob. Molly has one brother, Jesse, eight years older than she. A graduate of Harvard, Jesse earned his medical degree from the Dartmouth-Brown Medical Program and is currently a board-certified psychiatrist at the University of Vermont Health Network – Central Vermont Medical Center. He and his partner live in Burlington.

Having graduated from Montpelier High School in 2001, Molly followed in her dad's footsteps in attending Tufts. "It was a different world for me," she says. Not altogether comfortable

among her classmates, many of whom were graduates of private high schools and well-traveled, she nevertheless made dear friends and became involved in theater and Jewish life. A creative writing major with a minor in Jewish studies, she then enrolled in Emerson College, where she earned a Master's of Fine Arts degree in creative writing.

Her first job was as a reporter in Boston at The Jewish Advocate, a weekly paper focused on Jewish issues in New England. She also worked as a freelance journalist for non-profit organizations, focusing on such issues as food insecurity and at-risk youth. "It was good work," Molly says, "but I found Boston overwhelming. I was homesick, lost in the shuffle of urban life. I missed my family and small-town living. I was ready to come back to Vermont."

Molly took a job at the writing center at Johnson State College in September of 2007, where she helped students with their essays and did some one-on-one teaching. "I found the work meaningful and I loved being on campus," she says. But she left when winter set in, nervous about negotiating snowy and icy rural roadways, and acknowledging, "I'm not a great winter driver."

While visiting her brother, who was living in Burlington as a resident in psychiatry, Molly said to herself, "I could see myself living here." She accepted the part-time position as Membership and Outreach Coordinator at Ohavi Zedek in March of 2008 and held the job for a year-and-a-half, until the need for full-time work and health insurance forced her to give it up. Among the highlights of her work here, she recalls, was forging a deep connection with Rabbi Joshua; meeting and interacting with many OZ members; coordinating with other local Jewish groups, including Hillel; and planning a number of events for young professionals.

Molly was subsequently hired a second time by Mike Kanarick, then heading Jvillage, housed in the KSV building on Battery Street. Her stint at Jvillage, a leading provider of professionally developed websites for synagogues and other Jewish organizations, such as camps, daycare centers and schools, provided valuable marketing experience that served her well throughout her career.

Following a few years at Champlain College, where she worked as a full-time writer supporting fundraising and alumni efforts, Molly returned to journalistic pursuits as a freelance writer for non-profits and local publications, including Kids Vermont and the Best of Burlington series. "Although I'm working freelance, I'm busy full-time," she says. "And," she adds, "I haven't given up on creative writing – I'm working on a novel and some creative non-fiction pieces."

The year 2011 had a major impact on Molly's life: She met her future husband in May, but lost her beloved father in August, when Jim Ritvo died unexpectedly. Widely mourned in the Montpelier area, his death left Marjorie bereft and suffering several years of the pain of loss and grief. Molly and Jesse were grateful for the love and support of Beth Jacob, as well as for their mother's many friends in Montpelier who helped her through that difficult time.

A mutual friend had introduced Molly to Jason Stuffle, native of Pennsylvania, graduate of Penn State, IBM engineer, and outdoor enthusiast. They were married in 2014, and in March of 2018 their daughter Jimi was born. “Jason loves Vermont and is very happy living here,” Molly says. “He’s a member of Burlington’s Walk-Bike Council and is a big advocate for sustainable transportation and making our neighborhood more friendly to walkers and bikers. He also was instrumental in the city’s obtaining the new multi-use path in front of the hospital, and he’s the President of the Green Mountain Mashers, a local home-brew club.”

Jason and Molly take advantage of the outdoor scene in every season, snowboarding and skiing in the winter and biking, hiking and kayaking during the summer. Jason’s sister and brother come to Vermont with their families in June and they all rent cabins on Caspian Lake in Greensboro, a popular vacation spot for swimming, waterskiing, boating, fishing, and enjoying great beer and outdoor music events.

In 2018 Marjorie remarried, having been introduced by her sister to David Kerman, a retired lawyer from the Boston area. David and Marjorie now live in a lakeside condo in Burlington. “My mom had to leave a lot behind to move here,” Molly says. “I deeply look up to her for many reasons, but mainly how she committed to rebuilding her life when we lost my dad. She has found a new identity and a new sense of self. Though she misses her friends and community in Montpelier, she is a joyful and vibrant lady who is happy to be living closer to her son and his partner and her daughter, son-in-law and granddaughter.” (Mainly her granddaughter, Molly notes).

With the approach of spring and the success of the vaccination program, Molly is among many who are slowly starting to feel some sense of relief after the hard year of COVID restrictions. She is looking forward to family and friends being together again in person – although, she acknowledges – there is an upside in needing to rely on Zoom. “My aunt in Newton hosts joyful seders,” she notes as an example, “and not only were we able to join her this year, but my brother, who was vacationing with his partner in Hawaii, could be with us as well. I also was part of a virtual production called Expressing Motherhood, with cast members from across the world.”

It was Molly’s involvement with Full Circle that inspired her to connect again with OZ, and the family recently signed on as members. “We’re thankful for the wonderful, nature-centered program and the amazing staff there,” Molly says. “Jimi is thriving.” Currently serving as Preschool Committee Chair and working on the Imagine 2025 Family Engagement Task Force, Molly’s focus is on strengthening young families’ connection to the synagogue and helping to ensure that interfaith families like her own feel fully welcomed and engaged. While stressing Jewish values, she wants to help create ways for families to relate to OZ beyond religious services and rituals.

Brett Smith, who heads the task force, says, “I have gotten to know Molly in the past six months as we have volunteered together. She has brought amazing energy to projects like the

family meet-ups, the Phoenix Books fundraiser (April 26-May2), and her support of Imagine 2025. Her enthusiasm is infectious and she always has a warm smile. Interestingly, ours is one of many OZ friendships that have started since the pandemic,” he adds, “and I’m looking forward to being able to hang out soon with friends, both old and new.”

Welcome back, Molly!

~ Judy Hershberg

