

PROFILE Joanna Grossman

“It takes a village to raise a child”: an African proverb that means that everyone plays a part in the successful rearing of the children in the community – or, more broadly, that many people must cooperate to achieve the community’s desired goal. In the late summer and early fall of 2021 it “took a village” to create a multi-faceted High Holidays celebration at Ohavi Zedek. And the ‘village chief,’ so to speak, was Joanna Grossman.

Joanna was hired to pull all the strands of the yearly tapestry together because of her skill as an organizer. “Organizations need organizing,” she notes succinctly. With the departure of Executive Director Sarah Glassman at a critical time of year, Joanna worked with Rabbi Amy, Cantor Steve and a host of volunteers to create successful services and events that resulted in a total attendance of 150 (Erev Rosh Hashanah), 250 (RH day 1), 110 (RH day 2), 222 (Erev Yom Kippur/Kol Nidre), and 192 (YK) via Zoom and streaming, in addition to 150 (RH by the Lake) and COVID-limited in-person attendance at the synagogue. Volunteers included Rich Berger, Dan Rome, Deb Lashman, Basha Brody, Judy Danzig, Dorothy Fishman, Lee Lichtenstein, Sharon Panitch, Jeff Potash, Lynda Siegal, Ducky Donath and a number of others who took part in a variety of ways.

And the good news is that Joanna is remaining on staff at OZ as EPiC (Engagement, Programming and Communications) Director through the rest of the year. As President Nat Lew wrote in a message to congregants, “Over the past months Joanna has organized all manner of details around the Holidays, coordinated our staff and volunteers with an eye to improving morale and cohesion, scheduled and ran meetings of numerous working groups, and leapt into the complicated world of sanctuary technology. She has also worked to improve our communications, including both email marketing and social media presence, with a focus on messaging, tone, and responsiveness. In all of her work, Joanna’s contributions have been amazing, so it is hardly surprising that we have asked her to stay on.”

Joanna was born in Syracuse, NY in 1976, the younger of the two children of a radiologist and a librarian. Her father grew up in a large Jewish community in Baltimore; her mother, who sadly passed away when Joanna was only 7, was from the Bronx. After several years of single parenting, her dad remarried when Joanna was 11.

The family belonged to a Reform congregation, whose “cool rabbi” was committed to public service and community. Joanna says that his dedication resonated with her and helped her “find her place in the world.” Through friends in USY, the local Conservative youth group, she attended Nativ, USCJ’s gap year program for Jewish high school graduates, created to inspire future Jewish leaders in the Conservative movement. Joanna followed her Nativ experience with two semesters at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

With the sense that she wanted to have a positive impact on public policy, she enrolled in Syracuse University’s Maxwell School of Citizenship & Public Affairs, where she was active in Hillel and Vice President of Jewish Student Union. Upon graduation in December of 1997 with a B.A. in Public Policy Analysis, her first job was with the New York State Assembly, where she worked on several political campaigns, including those of Senators Chuck Schumer and Al D’Amato. The next several years took her to Albany, New York and Washington DC, until she experienced New York politics burnout.

Shortly after the World Trade Center attacks Joanna was hired by the Mayor's Office of Emergency Management to assist with recovery operations. "I worked the 8:00pm-8:00am shift mapping and surveying underground fuel tanks," she says. "It was a heavy load of custom cartography." During five years of employment there, she also worked on a project for the American Museum of Natural History, creating science education films involving maps and satellite imagery for other museums and NASA visiting centers. And she enrolled in Hunter College, where she earned her Master's degree in Geography & Geographic Information Science (GIS) in the fall of 2004.

Just before beginning her graduate studies Joanna met Stephen Cramer, then a graduate student at CCNY, now an award-winning poet, author and teacher. They were married in September of 2003. Three years later the couple decided to move to Vermont, where they settled in Burlington's South End. Steve teaches writing and poetry in UVM's English Department, and Joanna jumped with energy and enthusiasm into a series of several high-powered jobs. She worked for the city of South Burlington and as web and data manager for Vermont Monitoring Cooperative (State of Vermont and UVM), where she was solely responsible for GIS operations for the organization. After four years she moved on to MyWebGrocer as senior operations specialist, then followed that by establishing Joanna Geographica, offering GIS and related services to clients such as Cabot Creamery, NOFA-VT and MyWebGrocer.

She served as part-time faculty in the Geography Department of UVM and is currently a member of the adjunct faculty of the Environmental Science Program at St. Michael's College, introducing students to Geographic Information Systems. And since 2013 she has served as Geospatial Technologies Manager for the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets.

Now the parents of an 11-year-old daughter, Isa, Steve and Joanna added six chickens to their household while isolating during the pandemic. "Isa is just like her dad," Joanna says, "creative, a gifted writer and artist...and she just loves our chickens!" Having attended both Champlain Elementary School and the Integrated Arts Academy, Isa is now a middle schooler at Edmunds. Unsurprisingly, her mom was active in Champlain's PTO, where she assisted in fundraising events and helped parents and teachers approach the School Board when important issues arose.

Involved as well in community affairs, Joanna has been a board member of the Ward 5 Neighborhood Planning Assembly, served as the vice-chair of Burlington Democrats, and is currently the vice-president of City Market/Onion River Co-op. During the 2020 election she was a staff Digital Organizer for Indivisible, a national grassroots volunteer movement dedicated to progressive advocacy and electoral work on the local, state and national level.

And though she admits that she still doesn't feel like a 'true Vermonter,' Joanna does feel at home at the synagogue, far above and beyond her involvement as a Hebrew School parent. "I've always had a strong cultural affiliation with Judaism," she says, "and I'm learning more day by day at OZ. I feel so lucky to have landed here." While she recognizes the enormous difficulty in pulling us all together under COVID restrictions and in the face of so many recent changes, Joanna's main goal is to enhance the bond between the disparate OZ entities: young families, older members, and Preschool and Hebrew School parents and children.

To that end, she is focusing her considerable energy and enthusiasm on engagement and programming over the next few months. Friday evening services are already feeling reinvigorated. The Scholar-in-Residence weekend with Eliana Light, our first major event of the fall season, was highly

anticipated by the community. “After our successful Rosh Hashanah by the Lake program, Joey knew that we needed to create a COVID-safe outdoor event to engage OZ families (and the entire “OZ Family”), Cantor Steve said. “ Working with me, and with Basha Brody and the rest of the synagogue staff, she brought the Eliana Light event to fruition, and in so doing, helped to “welcome into the OZ tent” both OZ families and families from across Burlington’s landscape.”

A number of exciting projects are coming up, including OZ Beautification Day on November 14, a gala Chanukah celebration, events with Temple Sinai and PJ Library, and a challah bake-off. Watch for details as each of these events draws closer. And if you have suggestions for future events or learning opportunities, please be sure to contact Joanna.

“My career path has changed,” she says. “It feels so good to be here. I love the community....I consider it a blessing to be working for ‘my people.’”

~ Judy Hershberg



