

## Democracy Participation: Reflections of Election Inspectors and Election Protection Volunteers

By Mara Koven-Gelman, Director JCRC

Many members of the Jewish community were heavily involved in ensuring a safe and functional democracy during the 2020 Elections. The JCRC offers them sincere gratitude. Here are some of their roles and reflections.

### Election Inspectors

Several individuals participated in the Erie County Board of Elections training and acted as *election inspectors* on November 3, 2020. Thank you to Nina Lukin, Elliot Gabelnick, Rabbi Sara Rich, and Mike Steklof. Over 4000 people were election inspectors through Erie County (note: County Board of Elections manage the election under state law.) The day was long – starting at before 6 am and ending well after 9 pm.

**Rabbi Sara Rich**, executive director of Hillel of Buffalo, was an Elections Inspector for the Amherst 053 district at the Clearfield Community Center. “It was fascinating to learn more about how elections operate, and I was struck by the resolutely bi-partisan nature of the process.” She shared the purpose of being an Elections Inspector is to ensure that all procedures are followed, and within those parameters, to ensure that each registered voter has the opportunity to vote. The focus is on finding a way for each voter to vote, and to assist as needed.

Rabbi Rich shared, “one gentleman stepped up to the table and proudly presented his board of elections postcard. He was beaming as he announced that he had previously immigrated to America, and this was his first election. It was an honor to be a part of this significant milestone in his life.”

She added, “Many families came together to vote. Because I love college students, I always got very excited when a young adult was coming to vote in their first presidential election. At least twice the parents proudly told us that it was their son or daughter’s first time, and we would all celebrate together and make sure they got their “I Voted sticker.”

Despite the long day, “I encourage others to consider doing this for future elections. It is an excellent way to meet new people in the community and to support our democracy.”

**Mike Steklof**, director of Jewish Experience at the Buffalo Jewish Federation worked as an election inspector and was voted by his election peers to be chair of District 68 Tonawanda’s polling site. He shared, that over 1000 people voted during the day at that site, coming in a steady stream representing more than 50% of those registered.

The day was long starting at 5:15 am and closing at 9:20 pm. After the doors shut, paper poll books and USB (from the polls machines) were hand-delivered to the Board of Elections. Mike was “master” of the key (to the poll machine) all day.

“I really enjoyed participating and learning the machinery of democracy,” he said. He noted there was a great enthusiasm in the voters, many voting for the first time. He heard several people commenting, “This is the election I need to vote in.” He noticed that a couple of people voted and returned later in the day bringing friends and family to cast their vote.

“I come from a political family, Mike said, and “I am normally very partisan.” It was good to participate in non-partisan way, to help our democracy.”

Nina Lukin and Elliot Gabelnick were election inspectors in Cheektowaga at 180 George Urban Blvd; covering five districts. Nina was also the chairperson of her polling site. “I chose to support voting efforts in as non-partisan a way as possible by giving every registered Erie County voter the opportunity to cast a vote in confidence.

“When a gentleman aggressively questioned me in an attempt to spread disinformation to other voters, I was well-situated to respond calmly and factually. I was well-trained to contend with these situations and to support ALL registered individuals to vote, without interference, intimidation, or coercion.”

Nina worked with several veteran poll workers: one woman had worked for 28 years, another mother-daughter team for the past 40+ years. She noted that while there were many former poll workers, the “majority of us were brand new.”

Elliot Gabelnick said, “I learned a lot about the process, and I was glad to participate to ensure a fair election. I would gladly do it again.”

### **Election Protection**

BJF President Leslie Shuman Kramer and Mara Koven-Gelman were *election protection volunteers* with over 600 volunteers throughout NYS on Election Day. Election Protection is a 20-year-old coalition of over 100 local, state, and federation organizations dedicated to protect, advance and defend the right to vote. Common Cause NYS ran virtual trainings on how to monitor voting sites for safety, and accessibility, be available to answer voter questions and report issues to organizers.

Leslie and Mara covered (roving) five different polling sites on Buffalo’s East Side. They found all polling sites well organized, wheelchair accessible and followed COVID-19 mask and social distancing guidelines. Most sites said they opened their doors at the required 6 am with lines of eager voters waiting around the block. During our shift, from 9 am - noon, we witnessed no wait longer than three minutes.

Voters were genuinely proud and happy to vote in person. One mother dropped off a young son (voter) and waited in her van while he voted. Another newcomer immigrant couple shared proudly that this was their second and third U.S. voting experience. Through the texting platform **Group Me** –it was clearly some concerns were taking place throughout NYS but not in Erie County – intimidating parades or people coming into the polling sites to take unauthorized photos, inaccessible locations or lack of visible signage.

Sara Schultz also volunteered to be a roving poll monitor. “It seemed like a COVID-safe way to help this election year.” Sara worked 3-hour shifts over the course of the week that covered several areas of WNY from W. Eagle St. in downtown Buffalo to Akron. “*Kol hakavod* (aka, hats off) to the well- trained and tireless poll workers at each site.

“Most gratifying to me was helping the most fragile voters get to the front of the line and assuring voters with absentee ballots they could avoid the wait and drop off ballots right away. How proud I felt that our WNY voters were so respectful of each other and willing to stand in the rain, at times, to have their voices heard. While I am glad this election is over, I would gladly participate in the process once again!”

*Note: Did you work during early voting or on Election Day? If we missed your story, please contact [Mara@buffalojewishfederation.org](mailto:Mara@buffalojewishfederation.org) and Thank you!*

-30-