

Buffalo JCRC: A Year of Engagement, Social Justice and Caring

By Mara Koven-Gelman, JCRC Director

It is challenging to reflect upon the past month, let alone the past year. Founded in 2018, JCRC entered its second year in fall 2019. Here is a look back on how JCRC identified priorities and worked with partners towards “creating a more civil and caring community in WNY.”

Founding co-chairs Ted Steinberg and Nina Lukin with the JCRC worked on three major areas: Social Justice, Combatting Hate, Antisemitism, and Building Relationships with other faith, ethnic, and cultural and legislative groups.

December 2019

JCRC was featured at BJF' December Annual Meeting held at the Northland Workforce Training Center. Venerated community relations leaders, Lana Benatovich and Rabbi Alex Lazarus-Klein received leadership awards. Special guest Marnie Fienberg, founder of “2 for Seder” passionately spoke about taking action at hate/antisemitism by building bridges across faiths and diverse backgrounds.

Jan 2020

JCRC welcome experienced volunteer and community leader, Deborah Goldman as co-chair.

JCRC convened Buffalo Jewish community leadership to strategize about how to protect our region after the painful antisemitic attacks in Monsey, NY and Jersey City, NJ, The meeting outcome was closer working relationship with HRC and security manager, Susan DeMari. A webpage to offer information and contacts after experiencing antisemitic and hateful acts was created, <https://buffalojewishfederation.org/antisemitism-and-hate/>. *Note: all criminal hate activity should be reported to law enforcement.*

February-March 2020

Interfaith learning series with Rabbi Moshe Silberschein attracted over 60 students

Building on the BJF's successful 2017 Interfaith Clergy Trip to Israel, JCRC scheduled a Feb 2021 Civic Leader Trip to Israel. NYS Majority Leader Assemblyperson Crystal Peoples-Stokes', who had just returned from Israel with NYC JCRC, was to host a meeting with potential participants. Sadly, both the meeting and trip were postponed, hopefully to be rescheduled at a future date.

We all pivoted in March. First responders were grappling with lack of personal protection equipment. BJF and Foundation for Jewish Philanthropies took a leadership role in helping our community with PPP loans and tzedakah; JCRC's relationships were also working behind the scenes.

April 2020

Our friends in the WNY Chinese Club had access to 1000s of KN95 masks and wanted to help first responders and those in at risk of health disparities. JCRC organized and was part of several mask giveaways. The Compassionate Fund also bought more and masks for giveaways.

May 2020

JCRC organized a Passover of Hope with interfaith clergy friends from the 2017 trip to Israel. It was a memorable hour where beautiful prayers, poetry and song of hope were shared with over 600 views on YouTube.

June-August 2020

Engage in Racial Justice

After the killing of George Floyd and ensuing international civil protests, JCRC joined many Jewish communities in providing resources for white communities to better understand and immerse themselves in the lived experience of communities of color. This process highlighted that 12-15% for the Jewish community are Jews of Color. The Racial Justice Working Group began in August with Deborah Goldman as chair and a diverse membership from the Jewish community. Look for the outcome of their work in early 2021.

Voter Engagement, Census Completion

JCRC prioritized non-partisan activities in advance of the June 23 NYS primary and Nov 3 General Election. JCRC's intern Hannah Gabelnick created a detailed, Erie County Safe Voting 2020 webpage, palms cards and worked with many community partners on Getting out the Vote. JCRC also uplifted the work of many dedicated volunteers who encouraged voter registration and worked at election polls. JCRC takes pride in all its non-partisan voter engagement activities with its partners that contributed to Erie Counties highest election turn out – in five presidential elections. Over 70% of registered voters cast a ballot. Additionally, JCRC was part of Erie County Complete Count Coalition, which is proud of a 70% completion rate in Erie County.

JCRC Survey (graphic)

JCRC intern Hannah Slabodkin worked with JCRC to create and implement JCRC's first survey. Over 200 people took the survey: the findings included most Jewish community members were familiar with and approved with JCRC's activities and statements. Combatting Antisemitism and Hate was an extremely important priority. Of other social justice priorities, racial justice, poverty and health disparities ranked highest.

Combatting Antisemitism

Several times this year, JCRC and HRC have worked with security manager, Susan DeMari to investigate and address several antisemitic incidences. Regardless, if these incidents were resolved with help of law enforcement partners, it is always an opportunity to educate and sensitize.

Sept-November

JCRC continued to work with partners to Get out the Vote (GOTV) and encourage election protection and election poll workers. JCRC encouraged BJF and FJP to close offices Nov 3; enabling staff to safely vote or to participate in voting related activities

Todah Rabah to Nina Lukin

Thank you co-chair Nina Lukin for her unrelenting energy in leading JCRC for its first years. Nina is a strategic thinker, chaired the Binyan (foundation) working group identified and built relationships with community groups, constantly thinking one-step ahead. Nina will remain a valued member of the JCRC executive committee. She has joined the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee League of Women Voters of WNY, is a member of the BJF board of directors and took a leadership role with the Center for Jewish Engagement and Learning's Chanukah Box of Light project.

Nina recently reflected on her time as JCRC co-chair:

"The recent passing of the top Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, reminded me of my entrance into Jewish community relations. In Dec 2016, I travelled with JCPA to Israel on a fellowship, "Darchei Shalom or Paths of Peace" trip. In Ramallah, we met with the western educated, long-time advisor to PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat. Despite politically opposing the negotiator, I was able to engage in civil dialogue on vital yet challenging issues.

Given the recent election, leaving JCRC co-chair role is poignant. One of the first roles I took was co-sponsoring with the Buffalo Urban League the "Let NY Vote" campaign to advocate for legislative changes to allow for early voting, automatic voter registration, etc. in NY State. Early voting was critical in affording all registered New Yorkers the ability to 'spread out' in-person voting across nine additional days during the COVID-19 pandemic. "