

MCWG meets in-person after COVID-19
By Mara Koven-Gelman, JCRC director

After 18 months of occasional Zoom meetings, 15 members of the Multicultural Women's Group (powered by JCRC) met in- person in my backyard at the end of July. The members of the group come from diverse religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds but have become friends as they have shared their beliefs and experiences and listened and learned about each other.

This time was extra special. Was it special because we were finally in-person; and welcomed new members who joined during the pandemic? Was it because we were vaccinated, met outside in a beautiful garden (thanks Irwin) and did not have to mask? Alternatively, was it the range of delicious vegetarian food that was created and shared? Israeli falafel and salads, Chinese green onion dumplings, Indian dal and rice and Burmese sweet potato salad were some of the offerings.

Some members felt these gatherings allowed them to be themselves after feeling "othered" throughout their personal/professional lives. People shared openly about the challenges of managing virtual work and children's school and increasing demands from community members in a time of racial and immigrant disparities.

This group of women is very active in both their own and general community. Leadership activities include: Family Promise (supporting home insecure families), Kehillat Ohr Tzion Social Action Committee, Burmese Community, East Side Garden Walk and Freedom Wall landscape, Hispanic Women's League, Chinese Club of WNY, Minority Bar Association, NFJC restorative justice healing circles and Jewish Family Service Home Set-Up for newcomers (refugees resettling in Buffalo).

The theme on this balmy evening was baby-naming ceremonies. One member brought a three-generation handcrafted christening gown worn as babies by her father and herself. Another member shared the Sikh (pronounced "SIC") custom of bringing the baby to the Gurdwara (Temple) to randomly open the Book of Scripture (Guru Granth Sahib.) The first letter of the verse is the letter used to choose a name. A Jewish member spoke about the child welcoming ceremonies for males (Brit) and females (Simchat Bat). Not shared, but equally important, is a new Jewish prayer, said by new parents for assigning gender at birth while accepting it may be fluid later.

Several members agree that immigrant parents gave them "Americanized" names to help in assimilation. Some felt that ethnic names, while expressing one's identity, also affect racism in schools and hiring. And yet another person said, "I named my children names from my culture – it is important for me to keep that identity strong."

"I love that we can talk about these deep and important issues and know that we accept and respect one another," one person summed up the evening perfectly.