

Jewish Community Voice

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'Jewish Women as Agents of Change' event raises awareness

By REA BOCHNER Voice Staff



Discussing "Jewish Women as Agents of Change" were (from left), Rabbi Jennifer Frenkel of Cong. M'kor Shalom, Hazzan Alisa Pomerantz-Boro of Cong. Beth El and Cantor Jen Cohen of Temple Beth Sholom.

A crowd of over 100 women recently gathered at Cong. Beth El in Voorhees for "Jewish Women as Agents of Change," a memorable event to show support and raise awareness for JAFCO (Jewish Adoption and Family Care Options). For 25 years, JAFCO has offered support, counseling, and other services to families in crisis, be it mental health or substance abuse issues, domestic violence, raising children with special needs, or custody issues. With offices in Sunrise, FL and, more recently, Bala Cynwyd, PA, JAFCO also offers housing, foster, and adoption services for children in need, all of which are free of charge.

"It's an extra layer of support to help guide these people through extremely stressful circumstances," said Rebecca

Salus, program director of JAFCO Northeast.

The evening's women-centered theme was the brainchild of Co-chair Shari Smith, a member of Cong. Beth El. "Before this, we always had a Chanukah shopping theme," she said, "but women can do more than shop. I thought this would be an opportunity to bring women in the community together to talk about what inspires them." During a visit to the office of Cong Beth El Hazzan Alisa Pomerantz-Boro, Smith saw a book called, "Jewish Women as Agents of Change" and knew instantly it was the perfect theme for the event. With the help of Co-chairs Heidi Backal and Kathie Silverberg, Smith invited three female clergy members to be a part of the evening: Hazzan Pomerantz-Boro, Cantor Jen Cohen of Temple Beth Sholom, and Rabbi Jennifer Frenkel of M'kor Shalom.

"We wanted to make it clear that this is not about Beth El, this is about JAFCO," said Smith. "We wanted to expose them to a larger audience, and to bring together women from the larger community." The chairs accomplished their goal; the room was filled with members of multiple synagogues from across the religious spectrum, all of whom were there to show solidarity and support.

"I've been a fan of JAFCO for a long time," said Hazzan Pomerantz-Boro. "I have a child with special needs, so the work they're doing really resonates with me. We all have an obligation to make the world a better place, and JAFCO is doing work that's really important." Before she, Cantor Cohen and Rabbi Frenkel took the stage, guests enjoyed a lavish vegetarian dinner. The event also featured raffles for multiple prize baskets, including beauty packages, yoga swag, an elaborate cookie tray, a selection of wine, restaurant gift certificates, and other items, the proceeds of which would all go to JAFCO. Vendors from Finally, the Cherry Hill clothing boutique, and Beauty Counter beauty products were also there, and dedicated 20% of their earnings that evening to the organization.

JAFCO Director of Development Jill Lapensohn opened the presentation by inviting five guests to light a "candle of hope." Each of the five candles represented five children who die daily due to abuse and neglect. She then spoke about the intensive services JAFCO offers to families in crisis, such as a single mother raising a child on the autism spectrum, grandparents in their 70's caring for a granddaughter whose parents are addicted to drugs, and a family embroiled in a bitter divorce and custody battle due to domestic violence.

Rebecca Salus reiterated the importance of JAFCO's mission, saying, "We want every family in the community to know that they are not alone and we are here to support them."

A particularly touching moment came at end of a short film that featured some of the children whose lives have been touched by JAFCO. One of them was Steven Weiss, now in his mid-20s, who at four years old was moved from the home where he lived with his mother, a paranoid schizophrenic, and into JAFCO's Jewish Children's Village in Florida. The organization supported him emotionally and financially, and 25 years later, he had applied to some of the most prestigious business schools in the country for his MBA. At the end of the film, Lapensohn welcomed Weiss, in person, to the podium. Now living in Philadelphia, Weiss had just completed his first semester at Wharton Business School, and told the audience how deeply the "selfless individuals" at JAFCO had impacted his life. "It's no accident that I ended up at the only other place in the country with a JAFCO office," he joked.

After JAFCO's presentation, Hazzan Pomerantz-Boro, Cantor Cohen and Rabbi Frenkel led the room in a niggun, a melody, called "Olam Chesed Yibaneh" (We Will Build a World of Lovingkindness), then invited each table to choose Jewish women from biblical, historical, or contemporary times who inspire them. The discussion eventually extended to the entire room, as each of the three women spoke about leaders by whom they were inspired.

For all involved, "Jewish Women as Agents of Change" was a success, as the women there were reminded of their power and ability to be beacons for the larger Jewish community and those in need, and many left committed to do so. "When we take responsibility for supporting each other," said Salus, "it really makes a difference."

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